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GEORGE BELL AND SONS.

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PERSEUS WITH THE HESPERIDES.

P E R S E U S

WITH THE
HESPERIDES.

BY
BRYAN CHARLES WALLER.



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TO THE MEMORY OF
THREE POETS
OF MY OWN KITH AND KIN,
EDMUND WALLER, BRYAN WALLER PROCTER,
AND ADELAIDE ANNE PROCTER,
I DEDICATE THIS BOOK.

B

9157 A

It was a soothing place : the summer hours
Pass'd there in quiet beauty, and at night
The moon ran searching through the woodbine bowers,
And shook o'er all the leaves her kisses bright,
O'er lemon blossoms and faint myrtle flowers,
And there the west wind often took his flight
When heaven's clear eye was closing, while above
Pale Hesper rose, the evening light of love.

BARRY CORNWALL.

Da ihr noch die schöne Welt regieret,
An der Freude leichtem Gängelband
Selige Geschlechter noch geführet,
Schöne Wesen aus dem Fabel-land !
Ach, da euer Wonnedienst noch glänzte,
Wie ganz anders, anders war es da !
Da man deine Tempel noch bekränzte,
Venus Amathusia !

Da der Dichtung zauberische Hülle
Sich noch lieblich um die Wahrheit wand—
Durch die Schöpfung floss da Lebensfülle
Und was nie empfinden wird, empfand.
An der Liebe Busen sie zu drücken
Gab man höhern Adel der Natur,
Alles wies den eingeweihten Blicken,
Alles eines Gottes Spur.

SCHILLER. *Die Götter Griechenlands.*

SIX months ago to Kingsdale Hall
I rode one sultry summer's day,
Late in the afternoon, to call
And have a chat with Lady May.

I found her underneath a tree
With Master Jack, her little brother,
Who droned a lesson drearily,
And tried incipient yawns to smother.

The urchin paused at sight of me,
Then started up and yelled, "Hooray!"
For Master Jack was quick to see
The end of lessons for the day.

“Ah, how d’ye do?” said Lady May.
 “Papa is off to Quarter Sessions;
 And as his tutor’s gone away
 I’ve tried to teach this boy his lessons.

“There, that will do, Jack. You may go.—
 Sit down.—Of course you’ll stay and dine;
 I think Papa would like to know
 Your verdict on a cask of wine

“He got from Spain the other day,—
 You know he thinks your judgment good,—
 He’s not quite sure, I heard him say,
 If he should drink it from the wood.”

“Thanks, yes, with pleasure.”—“Come and see
 The roses that you sent last spring;
 You were so good to give them me,
 My garden’s quite another thing.”

Conversing in this idle way
 We sauntered off to see the trees,
 When suddenly my Lady May
 Said, “Who were the Hesperides?”

“Three nymphs who lived a while ago,
And owned some golden fruit,” I said ;
“But really I should like to know
What put these ladies in your head.”

“Well, yesterday I chanced to look
In Master Jack’s untidy den,
And there I lighted on a book
Which told of ancient Grecian men :

“Of Jason, and of Perseus too,
And how he flew across the seas
To some strange island where he knew
They dwelt,—those same Hesperides :

“And how he got a magic hat
In which he went to kill Medusa ;
It didn’t say much more than that,
And so I thought I’d question you, sir.

“And then I want you just to write
Some verses for me, if you please ;—
Yes, now, I mean,—this very night,
About these three Hesperides.

“ I never heard of them before,
 So far at least as I’m aware ;
 Although my little classic lore
 Includes Andromeda the fair :

“ I know her story well,—and so,
 Since poets’ brains are lazy organs,
 I will not trouble you to go
 Beyond that matter of the Gorgons.

“ You know you’ve promised me this age
 A poem of some sort or other,
 And haven’t done a single page :—
 You’re more provoking than my brother.

“ He does his lessons,—now and then,
 And keeps his promises—sometimes ;
 That’s more than can be said of men,—
 The sort, I mean, who deal in rhymes.

“ I’ll get the book and you shall see
 What Kingsley says, and make a trial ;
 It’s in the schoolroom,—come with me :—
 No, no, Sir Poet :—no denial !

“ I don’t quite know which shelf it’s on :
 What’s here ? ‘ Life’s Battle : How to Fight It ’ :—
 A dirty thumbed Greek Lexicon :—
 Ah yes, ‘ The Heroes.’—Go and write it.

“ There in the library you’ll find
 Pen, ink, and paper, easy-chair,
 And every requisite. Now, mind,
 You haven’t any time to spare.

“ We dine at eight.—It’s half-past six :
 So get away and do your task, sir :
 It’s vain to kick against the pricks,—
 Poets must write when ladies ask, sir.

“ What’s that you say ? ‘ You’ll do your best
 But really ’—I’m in earnest. Go, sir !
 I won’t relax my stern behest,
 Or let you off.—Oh dear me, no, sir.

“ Now mind, your very finest work :
 No nonsense verses, if you please, sir :
 You poets always try to shirk
 The work that’s set you, just to tease, sir.

“ There, get away,—and don't be late ;
 Papa is punctual when he dines
 At home.” I went and wrote till eight,
 And managed,—well, some fifty lines.

I read it over once, and made
 An alteration here and there :
 'Twas only so-so, I'm afraid,
 Not very fine, but pretty fair.

“ Well, well ; it's not the happiest vein
 For poetry, this taskwork singing ;—
 I'll read it over once again,”
 I thought ; “ but there's the first bell ringing.”

And Lady May came tripping in,
 And cried, “ My poem, if you please :
 I'm quite impatient to begin
 Your tale of the Hesperides ;

“ But dinner's waiting. Give it me,
 And come as quickly as you can :
 It isn't copied out, I see,
 And,—is this all ? You lazy man !

“ You’d scribble just as fast again
 About some silly rose or star.
 Oh dear !—of all provoking men
 In all the world, you poets are

“ The very naughtiest that exist !
 You’ve idled all your time away.—
 My cousin Ralph the novelist
 Writes fifty pages in a day !

“ I’m sure I gave you heaps of time
 To write a thousand lines or so.
 And,—why, there’s not one single rhyme,
 I’m sure you needn’t be so slow !”

When I attempted to explain,
 She answered with a little laugh,
 “ So poems do not grow by train,
 Or by electric telegraph !”

“ Well, p'r'aps you're right.—Who knows, or cares ?
 I'm sure I don't, one little bit.
 But, spite of all your bantering airs
 You shan't escape,—so finish it !”

Then frowning, like an angel, who
Takes stock of some half-pardoned sinner.
She made a little wilful *none*,
And let me take her in to dinner.

I took the luckless fragment back
That night, and worked and worked away,
As hard as any Grub Street hack :—
Six months it took me, and a day.

PERSEUS WITH THE HESPERIDES.

ARGUMENT.

PERSEUS, son of Zeus and Danae, having rashly promised to Polydectes, king of Seriphos, who hated him, that he would do whatsoever the king should require, was bidden to slay Medusa the Gorgon, and to bring her head as a present to the king. Now of these Gorgons there were three, whereof twain were immortal : and they had the wings of dragons, and their scales and claws were of brass : and so terrible were their eyes, that whosoever looked upon them was straightway turned into stone. And under pretence of this quest did Polydectes think to rid himself of the youth : but Perseus, having besought the help of Athené, was by her given a shield and a goatskin bag, and by Hermes a sword and certain winged sandals to fly withal, and was bidden to betake himself to the island of Hesperis, which lies in the regions of the setting sun, there to crave further help and counsel of the Nymphs, the daughters of the Evening Star, who had their dwelling therein. And, after many wanderings, he came at last in safety to that island : and the Nymphs, having first vainly striven to turn him from his quest, are presently prevailed upon to further it with much good counsel and effectual aid. And being instructed by Atlas, the uncle of the Nymphs, where he might find the Gorgons, he made his way thither, and having slain Medusa, was pursued by her two sisters, Stheino and Euryte, but escaped in safety and returned to Hesperis. And Atlas, being weary of the punishment whereto he was condemned by Zeus, craved of Perseus that he should show him the Gorgon's head, whereupon he was changed into a crag of stone. And Perseus, having desired to abide awhile in the island, was permitted to do so at the request of Hesperus, that he might comfort the Nymphs for the loss of Atlas.

PERSEUS WITH THE HESPERIDES.

BOOK I.

HOW PERSEUS CAME TO THE ISLAND OF THE NYMPHS.

A SPACE of skies and waters limitless,
Warm winds, bright sunshine, blue unruffled waves,
Blue heavens, profound and liquid as the seas,
And one man, soaring, like a soul in dreams,
Betwixt the blue of ocean and of air.—

Thus, wending ever westward, like a crane,
From night to morn across the midnight seas,
From morn to night across the dimpling waves,
By sunny isle and arid desert strand,
By many a goodly sight and many a foul,
Flew Perseus, like a cloud that, through the sky,
Floats dreamily along the shining track

Where Phœbus' wheels have cleft the deepening blue,
What time the twilight hovers o'er the world
With whispering wings and wild unbraided hair.
And round his path the sportive dolphins played,
And overhead the shrieking seagull soared :
And, on the waveless waste of Western seas,
The sun, that slowly now began to wane,
Shone with the splendour of declining day ;
When, low against the utmost western verge,
Arose the outline of a distant shore,
Which, ever as he sped across the waves,
Uprising slowly loomed upon the sky,
Distinct and dark against the cloudy line ;
At first a speck, but, nearer seen, an isle
Thick-wooded, and a mountain whose vast peak
Towered to the heavens :—and over all the land
Was silence, as the silence of a dream.

The winds were mute : the mirror of the deep
Lay still, without a ripple, and the sky,
Blue as the heart of some strange sapphire, glowed
With limpid azure, shot with nacreous pearl,
And hues as of the rose's inmost soul

That blushes red with perfume.—Like a rose
Set round with hyacinth and crocus flowers,
The wizard sun unfolded in the west
Leaf after delicate leaf of crimson cloud,
And opalescent halos, soft, like dreams
Strayed earthwards from the Islands of the Blest.

The brooding waters slept beneath his feet,
The brooding azure slumbered overhead,
Pregnant as if with some impending birth—
Some starry revelation of deep peace
And sweetest melancholy, such as drowns
The poet's soul, when, lost in other worlds,
He wanders, sailing on Elysian streams.

Low down upon the surface of the deep
Sea-swallows, swiftly darting,—like a thought
Immortal, never destined to decay,
Upon the placid spirit which reflects
All Nature in its clear unruffled lake,—
Shot silently above the smooth expanse
Of tideless waves, or sported, dipped, and swam,
Dimpling the dark-blue levels of the deep

With mimic wavelets: here and there a seal
Rose lazily and slowly sank again
In ever-widening circles, like a stone
Dropped softly on the bosom of a pool.

Like one that nears at last his native land
After long years of absence, Perseus flew,
Scattering the grey sea-swallows in his flight,
Fleeter than theirs,—and, through the rosy eve,
Swift as the arrows of the westering sun,
Slanted and dipped, and lighted on the shore,
Where, in the crescent of a tiny bay,
A gently-shelving beach of golden sand
Strewed thick with countless wealth of pearly shells
Sloped downwards to the waters :—at his feet,
Within the furthest concave of the cove
A prattling streamlet tinkled to the sea
'Twixt moss-grown banks of rock, with cooling plash
Of gentle waterfalls, that, through the hush
Of that sweet solitary island, fell
Softly adown from hidden inland heights,
And, falling, spent themselves in feathery spray,
With rippling cadence as of silver bells.

A holy isle of silence and of rest,
Girdled with Halcyon seas, it seemed the nest
Of happy Love, that, scared by earthly jars,
Here in the utmost cradle of the West
Had clasped sweet Peace, folded his restless
wings,
And reared himself a temple and a home.

Down to the very margin of the beach
A tangled copse of sylvan greenery,
Of boughs and leaves and flowers and fronds of fern,
And blossom-covered myrtle, intertwined
With fragrant briar and scented honeysuckle,
Wild roses, climbing vines, and clematis,
And strange luxuriance of unknown fruit,
Grew lavishly, and far as eye could see,—
With here and there a glimpse of mossy lawn,
Tall palm-tree or sequestered waterfall,—
Mile after mile stretched northward, to the foot
Of that vast mountain, on whose rugged sides
Huge rocky precipice and cloven chasm,
And dull-green forest-waves of giant pine,
Tier after tier, swelled upward to the clouds

Of vaporous mist that veiled the topmost peaks.

Here Perseus laid him down upon a bank
Hard by the stream, where beds of flowering thyme,
And the wild strawberry clustered thick with fruit,
Proffered sweet rest and food. Awhile he lay,
And ate and drank, and watched the sunset-red
Strike the white cloud upon the mountain peaks
With shimmering hues of rose and mellow gold.
And, as he gazed upon the goodly land,
The evening silence, stricken from afar,
Woke softly to the echoes of a strain
That rose and fell in wild harmonious gusts
Of melody, as when the nightingale,
Grieving amid the leaves in Tempe's vale,
Pours out her soul upon the vibrant air,
Full-throated, thrilling all the wastes with song.

Then Perseus rose, and leapt aloft, and towered
High in the air, and like a falcon, poised,
Searching the skies for prey, hung hovering
With eyes intent : and presently he spied
A flowery valley like a garden, hid

Among the woods to northwards, at the foot
Of the vast mountain, and within the vale
What seemed a marble palace: and the song,
Borne on the evening winds, came floating down
By cave and copse and lawn and winding stream,
Waking the slumbering echoes of the woods,
As if the spirit of that silent land
Spake in the love-soft music of its tone,
That, like a memory of forgotten days
Stung into sudden wakefulness, pursued
The startled spirit through its lonely halls
With wingèd footsteps, waking in its flight
Dim half-extinguished dreams of perished years,
Lost images of Beauty, strange desires,
Heart-hunger as for unimagined joy,
And floods of wild remembrance, keen with pangs
Of Hope, unborn, or dead. And Perseus sighed,
For fulness of delight, that thrallèd his sense
With longing for he knew not what, and stirred
Vague answering symphonies of voiceless song
Within his spirit, as the south wind's breath
Stirs, with late summer, through the murmuring
reeds.

Some moments' space, as hangs a golden cloud
Above the gates of sunset, Perseus hung,
A-dream upon the dusk of gathering eve,—
Then, like a darting swallow, dipped, and flew,—
Scarce higher than the tallest fronds of palm,—
Towards the garden, whence that distant song
Welled ever near and nearer on his ears,
As, like a feathery moth, with noiseless flight
He skimmed the topmost tangle of the copse,
And, lower ever, as he drew anear,
Sank through the shadowy twilight of the boughs,
Lost in the leafy darkness, till at length,
Scarce half a bowshot from the garden's verge,
Within a wilderness of myrtle-shrubs
He lit, and creeping softly through the boughs,
Looked forth unseen.

Upon a flowery lawn
Three maidens sang beneath a wondrous tree
Laden with golden fruit that through the night
Of dusky foliage glimmered thick, like stars
Set in the raiment of the Pleiades.
Straight upward, like a fountain, from the turf,
Uprose the stem of that enchanted tree,

Five cubits higher than the golden heads
Of those fair Nymphs,—then broke in rain of boughs,
And vivid lightning-gleams of glittering fruit.
And round about the maidens and the tree,
Within the shadow of the outmost boughs,
The loathsome circle of a hideous snake,
With bristling mane and wrinkled slimy fold,
Lay wallowing: blotched with green and livid
red,

And lurid panoply of leprous scale,
Among the flowers his frightful length reposed
Huge as a pine-trunk: and his monstrous head
Lolled lazily a-doze upon his tail.

Foul as the birth of some infernal dream
That scares the wanderer in the fields of sleep
With fiendish features, suddenly unveiled,
And hell-lit eyes,—till, with affrighted cry,
He wakes once more to shuddering consciousness
Of earthly life,—the dire abortion lay
'Twixt Perseus and the Nymphs: and loathing deep
Possessed him, and, withal, a fierce desire
To slay the gruesome reptile, and to purge

The isle of such fell presence, that inspired
Instinctive hate :—hard-grasping, on the hilt
Of glittering Herpé, that enchanted blade,
Forged by no mortal hand, his fingers closed
Convulsively, and from the jewelled sheath
Half plucked the gleaming death, whose trenchant
edge

Nor tempered bronze, nor triple adamant,
Nor aught of mortal or immortal mould
That breathes beneath the sun might dare un-
scathed,

So deftly had Hephæstus fashioned it
In that grim forge whose unextinguished fires
Volcanic, blaze through Etna's fiery throat :—
When, all at once, the gathering tide of song,
That, even now, from wild tempestuous flow
Had sunk to low melodious murmurings,
Rose clear and full upon the listening air
With subtlest sorcery of blended tones,
And choric harmonies that ebbed and flowed,
Re-echoing far through slumbering woodland
bowers,
And twilight solitudes of dreamful space.

As one who, witched by dark Circean spells,
Halts, rigid, half-transformed to lifeless stone,
At muttering of a charm, so Perseus stood
Tranced by the passionate magic of the song :
For all his soul, grown drunk with melody,
Floated and sank beneath the floods of sound,
Deep-drowned, intoxicated as with wine,
Yet evermore athirst. Back in its sheath
Gently he thrust the blade, nor heeded more
Of that fell snake, or any evil thing ;
For ill had grown an empty name, and toil,
Loss, sorrow, death and pain, yea life itself,
Dim far-off visions. Motionless he crouched
Among the myrtles, listening like a Faun
When Pan pipes softly on the warbling reed,
At eve, beside the lone Arcadian streams.

Awhile in chorus sang the sister Nymphs,
As round the tree, with light majestic tread,
And languorous maze of lithe voluptuous limbs,
In stately dance they circled, hand in hand :
While ivory arms, and fluttering gauzy robe
Caught loosely in about the naked waist

With zone of woven gold and orient pearl,
In graceful undulation gently swayed
To each responsive cadence of the strain.
But soon, with changing step and loosened hands,
They moved to other measures, each in turn
Chanting alone the burden of the song,
Each answering each : and thus the maidens sang :—

ÆGLE.

Upon the listless mountain-side
The pine-tree sleeps his dreamless sleep,
On the blue ocean, far and wide,
White clouds lie mirrored in the deep.
A slumber steeps the earth and sky
With nectarous dews of restful dreaming ;
The very breezes passing by
Fret not the lake's untroubled gleaming.
The quiet of declining day,
The waning sun's wild colour-play,
The pale light from the zenith streaming,
When high above the noiseless night,
Selené's silvery palace shines,
The rising of Orion bright,

The waning of the Pleiades,
The purpling of the berried vines,
The mellowing of the apple-trees,—
Are all whereby Time marks his flight
In this our sunset land of light.

ARETHUSA.

Alone ! alone !—and on the sea,
The dead white daylight blazing falls,—
The starry eyes of midnight skies
Blink dim on these enchanted halls :
While we the lonely sisters three
Among the woods and waterfalls,
Hand in hand, hand in hand,
Wander through the listless land,
Weaving choric dances fleet,
With the maze of airy feet.
Underneath the apple boughs,
Underneath the laden trees,
By the glimmering stream that flows
Downwards to the changeless seas,
Through the everlasting Spring,
Everlasting as is he,

Through the woods we wandering sing
To the murmuring of the sea
Sweetest songs,—but yet, ah me !
Who of men is here but we ?

HESPERIA.

Silence on the lofty mountain,
Silence in the woods and vales,
Silence by the feathery fountain,
Where the shade of many a bower
Veils the blinding noonday heat
From the happy fruit and flower,
'Mong which the transient butterfly,
Like a pearly vapour sails :—
Silence on old Atlas' seat,
High above the snow-peak lonely,—
Silence everywhere, save only
Where beneath the apple trees,
We the lone Hesperides
Charm the dragon-snake asleep ;—
Or where wandering wind and wave,
From some distant ocean-cave,
Wake wild echoes of the deep.

ÆGLE.

Half-way up the mountain-steep,
Where the flickering fen-fires play,
Floats the mist in ringlets curled,—
Far away, far away!—
Image of the Eastern world,
Unto us the maidens three,
Of the shoreless Western sea.

ARETHUSA.

Far as keenest eye can see,
Eastward lies the blinding blue ;
And the Hyperborean land,
Nearer to the sunrise lies,
Than our land of sunset skies.
There is neither ship nor crew
That may reach our magic strand :
Therefore dwell we all alone,
For of men and Gods is none
That hath touched this silent shore,
Nor shall be, for evermore.

HESPERIA.

Yet methinks an ancient tale,

Saith that in the times to be,
Zeus-born Heracles shall sail
O'er the shoreless sea,
And shall bear this fruit away,
Which, in bygone ages, Ge
Gave Hera on her marriage-day.

ÆGLE.

Woe is me if this be true!
Never more shall ye and me
Watch the yellow golden fruit,
Dawn from green of leafy shoot,
As the sun from out the sea,—
As the stars from out the blue.
Would that one would join our play,
Stay and rest with us awhile,
Here in endless holiday,
In our sunny western isle,
Where the storm-clouds never darken, and the
 laughing sunbeams smile!
Yet thou say'st that Heracles
Will but bear our fruit away,
Break our pleasant orchard trees,

And then go hence and leave us here,
Sad maidens in a ruined home,
To wail among the broken boughs,
'Neath which of old we used to roam
Afar from any thought of fear.

ARETHUSA.

I know not why, but thou dost rouse
Strange thoughts within my troubled soul :
But sure that evil hour is far,
And many a peaceful year shall roll,
Ere change for good or evil come
To visit this our island home.

For death nor sorrow, change nor pain,
Have aught of lasting empire here :
Only the slow-revolving year
Goes round and round and round again :
And slowly, imperceptibly,
The languid seasons dawn and die,
And rise and set, and dream and wake,
From age to age, with naught to break
Their sweet yet sad monotony.
Yea, Change herself, if change could be

On this remote unchanging shore,
Herself would change, and change no more.

HESPERIA.

Change?—What have we to do with changeful
hours?—

Behold! the winds are on the wakening sea :
The evening breeze is stirring through the bowers,
The latest sunshine bathes the apple-flowers,
The red clouds stream before the blast and
flee

Over the furthest limit of the world :
And from the east, with tangled hair uncurled,
The dusky Twilight mounts her nightly car.
And lo! where now, in the remotest skies,
Our Father's silvery orb doth slowly rise,
And through the distance throws its earliest
beam

On us, the daughters of the Evening Star,
The haunters of the forest and the stream,
The guardians of the magic fruit that grows
Here, where the pathless Western Ocean flows
Towards the mighty sources of the sea :

Whence Day and Night and Heaven and Earth arose,
And Time the daughter of Eternity,
Among the elemental snows,
Where the dying daylight goes.

ÆGLE.

Birth and Death
Are but parted by a breath :
Time and Space, Earth and Sky,
Day and Night, are born to die.
End of Life is Death begun,
End of Death is Life ; and none,—
Not the Gods that rule on high,—
Knoweth why.

ARETHUSA.

Joyfullest newcomer
Of the blushing summer,
With the autumn fades the rose :—

HESPERIA.

Trailing skirts of Twilight darken
Daylight's close.

ÆGLE.

Hearken ! hearken !
Evening's rustling plumes uncloze.

ARETHUSA.

Winds are sighing, sunlight dying,
Sleepily the streamlet flows :

HESPERIA.

Gently cooing, songbirds wooing
Soft repose
Fold their wings as Phœbus flying,
Over into darkness goes.

ÆGLE, ARETHUSA, HESPERIA.

Dews of evening softly falling
In the apple-blossoms glisten.
Father Hesperus, we thy children, calling,
Bid thee rain once more thy silvery smile
On this solitary isle,
Where we droop in weary peace.—Oh, listen !
Father Hesperus our life is lonely :
Send us one of Gods or men, one only,

Only for a little while !
Or thyself descend from those far starry spaces
Dimly glimmering in the heaven above us
Where thy bright-winged brethren have their
dwelling-places :

Come thyself, or send us one to love us !
Father, hear us !

Naught gives answer, naught is near us
Save the forests and the waters.
Father, from thy crystal portal
Look on us thy suppliant daughters !
What avails this weary blank immortal ?—
This sad life that lacking nothing, lacketh all ?
Hear, oh ! hear us when we call !
Lest we pine away and wither in this land of sweet
despair,—
Cease at last, and melt like Echo into viewless air !

The lingering music wailed itself away
Slowly and mournfully, as loth to die
Upon the hungry silence of the night.
And now the maidens stayed their mystic dance,
And stood, with heaving breasts and dew-lit eyes,

And faces turned towards the Evening Star,
Whose undisturbed impenetrable eye
Glared glassily above the darkening West :
And, as they gazed, they drooped their heads and
sighed,

And murmuring plaintively, "He hears us not :
Surely he cannot hear us !"—sighed again
More heavily,—then slowly turned away,
And stepping o'er the body of the snake,
Who raised his crest in lazy greeting, passed
Along the border of a little lake
Towards the marble palace by the woods :
And, as they neared the spot where Perseus lay,
Suddenly, bursting through the myrtle-brake,
He stood before them. With affrighted scream
They made as though to flee : but Perseus spoke
Gently, as wise Athené schooled his tongue,
And bade them fear not. Winningly he spake,
Full softly, yet the watchful dragon heard,
And, rearing upwards his enormous neck
High as the tree-tops, roared till every leaf
Shook in the woodlands, and the vibrant air,
Smitten to life by that hoarse tide of sound,

Tingled with monstrous bellowings. Yet the
Nymphs,

Trembling 'twixt fear and hope, restrained his rage,
The while they gazed on Perseus doubtfully
Like startled deer, with eyes whose luminous depths
Half-loving, half-distrustful, strangely moved
His wondering soul, then questioned, "Who art
thou ?

Art thou Apollo, fair Latona's child,
Or Hermes the swift messenger of Zeus ?
Say, art thou God or man ? Or art thou he
Of whom the ancient prophecy foretells,
That he shall carry off our golden fruit,—
That Heracles the Mighty, whose dread name
Rings echoing in our souls this many an age
With inarticulate menace, conjuring up
We know not what pale images of fear :—
Nay then, speak quickly :—let us know the worst."

Then Perseus, answering mildly, made reply :
"May sorrow, fear, and every evil thing
That dogs the steps of Man, be far from ye,
O lovely Nymphs, and from these tranquil shores,

For evermore. As for this Heracles
I know him not : nor do I covet aught
Of golden fruit from yon enchanted tree,
Albeit to some, perchance, that yellow gleam
Were sore temptation. Not for such base ends,
Have I, a mortal of the Hellene race,
Traversed the seas by long and perilous paths :
But rather on the errand of the Gods,
I fare, with whatsoever might I may,
To slay the loathly Gorgon, whose foul brood
Infests the earth and moves to righteous ire
Their equal minds :—and she at whose command
I go, Pallas Athené, bade me seek
These sunset regions. Think not, fairest Nymphs,
That I am come to rob or to destroy.
Nay, rather as a suppliant do I come,
To crave your aid and counsel in my need,
For ye are wise as beautiful, and know
How I must quit me in this desperate deed :
Wherein, if I succeed, I win renown
Immortal, yea and life immortal too,
Such as the Gods' and yours,—but failing, die
Within the heart of that Unshapen Land

Where lie the formless phantoms of the Past,
Ruinous, half-dismembered, waste and bare,
By slow disintegration crumbling down
To blank oblivion, night and nothingness,
Until they are as though they had not been,
Swept clean away, abolished utterly
By Time and Change,—and side by side with these,
The scarce-embodied ghosts of things to be,
Rude, vague and shapeless, as the stubborn mass
Of marble, whence the cunning sculptor's thought,
Informing, all-compelling, deftly lures
To gradual birth the coy reluctant shape
Of some fair statue, with creative touch
Moulding its chaos into ordered form
And curving symmetry of breast and limbs.—
And there, where incompleteness and decay
In strange disorder heaped and mingled lie,
Naked and barren, hideous to behold,
If ye refuse your succour must I roam
In bootless wanderings blind and objectless,
Aimlessly groping towards an unknown goal,
Like some doomed bark, afloat on pathless seas,
Without or sail or rudder,—till, at length,

Still stumbling onwards through the desolate
gloom,
Alone, unholpen both of Gods and men,
Sinking, I fall, and perish miserably,
Unwept, without a memory or a name."

He ceased : and joyfully the sister Nymphs,
No longer doubting aught of his intent,
Came close about him, murmuring : " This is he,
For whom we prayed, our father's messenger."
And eagerly, with long inquiring gaze,
They scanned the tall and goodly child of Zeus,
Who stood before them, towering, like an elm
Above three lilies on one slender stem,—
Strong in the fearless strength of godlike youth,
Long-limbed, deep-chested, lithe and sinewy,
Blue-eyed, with eagle mien, and golden locks
Ambrosial, that fell in clustering curls
About his broad white brows and shapely neck,
Firm-set on mighty shoulders, like the base
Of Dorian shaft, on some broad pedestal
Fast-rooted, in despite of age and time :—
A noble presence, cast in stately mould,

Heroic, such as in Olympus' halls,
Is many a one, that, in the elder days,
When men and Gods held closer fellowship,
A mortal among mortals, trod the earth,
Joyed, sorrowed, loved and hated, lived and died,
Even as mankind,—but now, immortal, sits
Throned loftily above the realms of Death,
In recompense for many a deathless deed,
Of fame imperishable and high renown.—
Nor less than these seemed Perseus to the Nymphs,
So richly had Athené dowered him
With every choicest gift of soul and sense,
Beauty and strength, and terrible manhood, stern,
Yet gentle, tempered to complete accord
Of opposites harmoniously combined,—
Valour with prudence, king-like majesty
With mildness, comeliness with wisdom, grace
With iron hardihood, simplicity
And trustfulness with judgment, such as holds
True balances, and weighs the false as false,
Discerning base for base, and foul for foul,
Though all men else with one consentient voice
Should cast rank falsehood in the face of Truth,

And, blinded by imbruted instinct, call
All foul things fair, all base things honourable.
Calm was he, yet with no self-centred calm,
Impassive, heeding naught of mortal woes,
But rather calm as he in whom the mind
Bears rule, and ever-watchful, sways the sense
With undisputed empire, such as springs
Of self-control, high daring, fixed resolve,
And sleepless enterprise, that overbears
All obstacles by force of godlike will
Persistent, all-subduing,—like the sea,
That patiently, with slow incessant toil,
Batters the base of some columnar mass
Of pillared basalt, hard as adamant,
That stands alone in solitary strength,—
Sapping the stronghold of its stony roots,
Day after day with ceaseless wave on wave.
—A myriad times the billowy legions roll
Back from the charge, repulsed yet undismayed,
But, fresh from wildest rout, come seething back
With furious swirl and rush of angry waves,
Flecked white with menacing foam, that, falling,
burst

Hurled backward ever by the ponderous mass,
In clouds of driving mist and shivering spray,
And shuddering cataracts of broken floods,
That staggering blindly seawards foiled and spent,
With eldritch shriek, and sullen sweltering moan,
Sob out their boisterous rage in agonies
Of sibilant spite,—till, gathering once again,
Surge after surge with desperate vehemence,
Falls shattering on the stubborn crag, that
mocks

Their turbulent yet ineffectual might
With mute derision, though its narrowing base
Grows more and more unstable: till, at length,
Tormented, buffeted, and undermined,
Now here, now there, by the implacable foe,
It sways, and, tottering forward from its seat,
Falls hurtling downwards, with appalling crash,
And din of clamorous blasts and churning waves,
In headlong ruin to the hungry deep.

Such, then, was Perseus, son of Danae,
And such the steadfast purpose of his mind,
To slay the Gorgon, and to win renown.

Then quickly onward, through the glimmering
wood,
They hurried till they reached the palace gates :
Pale shone the risen moon upon the walls
Of gleaming alabaster, strangely wrought
With tracery of forms unknown to man,
And sculptured columns of stupendous size,
Each several shaft hewn from one single block
Of sparkling crystal : gates of ponderous bronze,
Forged of huge bars of metal, intertwined
In wreaths of flower and fruit, stood open wide :
And o'er the gilded threshold, Perseus passed
With those fair Nymphs into a silent hall,
Hung round with broidered arras :—food and
wine
The maidens brought him, and he ate and drank :
The while they ever questioned curiously
Of whence he came, his birth and parentage,
His name, his errand, and his wanderings,
And all that had befallen on the road.

And Perseus, answering briefly, told the tale
On this wise : “ Son am I of Danae,

Sole daughter of Acrisius, Argos' lord,
Of whom great Zeus, Father of Gods and men,
Descending in a golden shower, begat
Me, youngest, least renowned of all his sons.
Whereat, the king Acrisius, sore displeased,
Cast mother and babe into a little boat,
Without or sail or oar, and thrust us forth,
Abandoned to the mercy of the waves.
But, by good fortune, or my father's care,
I know not which, the crazy boat took land
Safely upon Seriphos, in which isle
I grew to man's estate.—And, on a day,
King Polydectes made a royal feast,
Whereto he bade me with the island chiefs,
Who brought rich gifts of horses and of arms,
While I, being poor, brought naught. Whereat, the
king,
Who, for what cause I know not, hated me,
Spake scornfully, 'Where, Perseus, is thy gift?
Right royal should thy present be, I trow,
For, since the old wives call thee child of Zeus,
Doubtless thy sire hath well provided thee,
And thy sole gift shall beggar all the rest.'

“Whereto, ashamed and angry, I replied :
‘No gift have I, O king, for I am poor :
Yet forasmuch as thou hast bidden me
With these that pay good cheer with costly gifts,
Lo ! whatsoever thou shalt ask of me
Which wealth can buy thee not, though valour may,
That will I do to quit me of my debt,
In manhood paying what I lack in pence.’

“Then sneeringly replied the crafty king,
‘Thou sayest well. I crave the Gorgon’s head.
’Twere worth an army in these troublous times,
And thou shalt win it for me.—Get thee hence,
For those that give not may not feast with kings.’
Whereat the servile courtiers laughed and jeered,
Calling me braggart, fool, and beggar’s brat,
While, dumb with rage and shame, I glared on them
Like a caged wolf,—then turned and left the hall.

“Forth of the town, scarce heeding where I went,
I roamed like one distraught : for in my mind
Wrath and confusion strove for mastery,
So that I recked not where I turned my steps,—

Till, on the cliffs to westward of the isle,
I lighted on a solitary spot
Wherein I sat me down, and strove to think
How it were best to act :—when, suddenly,
Like lightning through the tempest of my brain
There flashed the recollection of a dream
I dreamt at Samos, whither I had sailed
Three years ago, aboard a Tyrian ship
That plied among the isles with merchandise :
And while the ship was lading in the port,
One sultry afternoon I roamed away
Alone, and in a sacred olive-grove,
Hard by Athené's temple, laid me down
Beside a little stream to rest awhile :
And,—though I knew it not,—I seemed to sleep
Or fall into a vision, for I dreamed
(If dream indeed it were) a wondrous dream :
For standing straight before me, I beheld
Blue-eyed Athené armed and helmeted ;
And in one hand she held a glittering spear,
And in the other this same oval shield,
On whose bright surface, side by side, I saw
Twain images reflected :—this the first.

—A lazy boor sat underneath a tree,
Quaffing huge draughts of wine,—and by his side
A monstrous boar lay wallowing : and, methought,
So like was each to other, that I knew
No difference ; for, at times, the man would seem
To wallow on the ground, the while the boar
Sat manlike, drinking in his master's seat :
Whereat, fulfilled with loathing and contempt
Upon the next I turned my gaze.—And lo !
A hero fought with monsters, and, hard by,
A poet, crowned with laurel, sang his deeds
To the rich music of a sounding lyre,
Whose witchery stole upon my raptured sense
Like Love,—and these twain also seemed the same :
For ever and anon the bard would take
The sword, and he that fought the bays and lyre :
And still the sword clave mightily, and still
The breathing lyre sang sweetly as before.

“ And softly to my soul the Goddess spake :
‘ Choose which thou wilt, O Perseus,—boor and
 swine,
Or bard and hero. Yet I warn thee well

The first live long and have their ease of life ;
The second live in travail all their days,
And ofttimes perish in the flower of youth,
Yet oft survive to win a deathless name.
Choose therefore : yet take heed lest afterwards
Thou dost repent, for as thou choosest now,
So shall it be with thee for evermore.'

" Then, starting to my feet, I cried aloud,
' The choice 'twixt wellnigh swine, and wellnigh
God,
Is easy, short, and final, nor admits
Room for repentance. Be my doom the last !'

" Thereat the Virgin Goddess smiling said,
' Well hast thou chosen, O youth, and worthily !
The fiat hath gone forth. Warrior and bard
Thou art henceforward, or shalt be.—And lo !
Because thou hast chosen the steep and difficult
path,
That, while it rears thee high above thy kind,
Yet chills and isolates, loosening the bonds
'Twixt thee and those who are not as thou art,—

Thou hast my love and favour from this hour,
And when thou callest on me I will hear.'

"Thus ran my dream ; whereof, in sooth, till then
Little I recked, save only as a dream :
But now, being sore perplexed, within my mind
The thought arose, ' How if it were no dream ?
What if it were indeed Athené's self,
Who bade me choose my destiny, and spake,
Saying, " I will hear thy prayer and answer thee."—
What if I pray and yet no answer come ?
—Then am I naught advantaged, of a truth ;
Yet still in nothing is my plight the worse,
Which now is desperate.—Wherefore I will pray.'

"Forthwith I raised my hands to heaven and prayed,
Saying, ' O fair and pure ! if verily,
In very deed thou didst appear to me
In Samos, and didst bid me choose my lot,
Which, being chosen, thou didst approve, and swear,
Saying, " When thou callest, I will surely hear " :—
Hear me, I pray, in this my utmost need,—
Me, who except thou hearken am but dead,

Yea, worse than dead, dishonoured and despised :
O Virgin Goddess, hear me ! Hear or slay !'
Yet, though I groaned aloud in agony,
Naught answered : there was neither voice nor sign.

“ Then, all at once, I spied a little maid
That, by a narrow path along the cliffs,
Carrying a faggot, toiled with weary steps
Towards the town-land. Pale she was, and thin,
A fragile creature, delicately small,
With wondrous large blue eyes, as wild and
deep

As mountain meres, yet plaintive soft and meek
With patient resignation. Oftentimes
She laid her burden down upon the ground
Panting, then slowly raised it, and again
Pressed quickly onwards, staggering under it ;
Till, stumbling on the rough uneven ground,
To save herself from falling, she let slip
Her load, which, lighting on a slanting rock,
Rolled to the edge and vanished o'er the brink :
Whereat she sat her down beside the track,
With such a wail of hopeless misery

As stirred my heart-strings strangely ;—for, I
thought,
‘ Poor little helpless maiden, thou and I,
Strong man and feeble child, are both alike
Companions in misfortune ! Thou hast lost
Thy sticks, and gained a beating too perchance,—
While I—what have I lost ?—My life, my all.
—Yet, ere I go my way to some dark end,
One little deed of kindness will I do :
For, though I die unaided of the Gods,
I will not learn from them to act as they ;
But, taught myself by stern experience,
How bitter and sore a thing it is to prove
The ponderous apathy of selfish Gods,
Will rather learn to render help unasked,
For pity’s sake and human charity.’

“ Such converse holding with mine own sad thoughts,
Straightway I ran towards the little maid,
Saying, ‘ Weep not ! be comforted, sweet child ;
For I will bring thy faggot back to thee,
And thou and I will hale it to the town.’
Whereat she smiled a wan and tremulous smile,

Saying, 'O sir, the crags are steep and high,
And to the nearest place of safe descent
'Tis half a league or more, and I am tired,
Ah me! so tired:—but wherefore shouldst thou go
For me, a wretched child, whom no one heeds,
Except to beat?—for I am motherless,
And little can I do, and naught aright,
Not even fetch a faggot from the wood.'

" 'The fouler shame,' I cried indignantly,
'To those who overtask and harry thee!—
Abide thou here, and I will fetch thy sticks,
And speedily: I know a nearer way.'

" Even as I spake I turned and sought a path,
Rough and precipitous, but safe enough
For hardy mountaineers, and, in brief while,
Descended to the beach, and with the sticks
Clomb back again: but, when I reached the top
I could not see the maiden anywhere,
Only a stately lady, and a youth
Keen-eyed, broad-shouldered, light-limbed as a stag,
With golden sandals on his feet, wherefrom

Grew living wings, that quivered like a hawk's
Poised in mid air, afloat. Then, as I neared,
The lady spake : ' Hail, hero, stout of heart !'
But the youth said, ' Hail, poet, sweet of song !'

“ ‘ Not so, fair lady and good sir !’ I cried ;
‘ No hero and no bard am I, nor aught,
Save a poor youth, despised of Gods and men.
I pray you, mock me not : ’twere no good deed
To jest at one who bears so sore a heart
As this which loads my breast : but rather, say
Where I may find a little child, for whom
I went to fetch this faggot from the beach.’

“ ‘ Look on me,’ quoth the lady : and straightway
I gazed into her eyes, and, wondering, saw
The little maid,—but, as I gazed and gazed,
Astonished and dismayed, she changed, and grew
Fairer than all fair women upon earth,
Taller and statelier than all mortal men,
—A Goddess manifest. Whereat I fell
Prone on my face and worshipped. For a while
Was awful silence,—then she spake again :

“ ‘Be of good cheer, O son of Danae !
Thy prayer is heard. As thou hast done to me
So will I do to thee. I know thy need,
Even as I know the thoughts of all men’s hearts.
Pallas Athené am I, child of Zeus,
Born motherless of his sole thought,—the same
Thou sawest at Samos in the olive-grove ;
Who bade thee choose thy earthly doom, and swear,
Saying, “Call and I will answer,”—of which oath,
In letter or in spirit, there shall fail
To thee no jot or tittle. For, behold,
That which the treacherous king required of thee,
Plotting thy ruin and death, shall bring thee fame,
And life,—perchance immortal. Haste thee now !
Unloose yon faggot and take what lies therein.’

“ And kneeling still, I loosed the sticks, and thence
Drew forth this wallet and this shining shield :
Then said Athené, ‘Gird thyself therewith :
And when thou find’st Medusa, take good heed
Thou look not on her face, for that were death,
But only on her image in this shield ;
So shalt thou smite her safely. Furthermore,

When thou hast slain her, with averted eyes,
Thrust thou the head into this goatskin bag,—
The hide of Amalthea,—which alone
May safely hold it.'

Then the young man spake :

'Hermes am I, the messenger of Zeus :
And, since no weapon forged by mortal hands
Hath power to slay Medusa, take this sword,
Herpé, the far-famed Argus-slayer,—wherewith,
If thou shalt smite but once, there lives not aught,
In earth or heaven, shall brave thy stroke unscathed.
And since the way is long and difficult,
O'er lands untrodden yet by steps of man,
And virgin seas unswept by earthly oar,
These wingéd sandals do I lend to thee ;
Wherewith, if thou pursue, shall naught escape,
Nor shall aught overtake thee if thou flee :
For they are fleetest of created things,
Save Light alone. Arise and gird them on.'

"Then straightway, leaping to my feet, I rose,
And girded on the sandals and the sword,
The while the blue-eyed Goddess spake once more :

“ ‘ Now art thou thoroughly furnished to that end
Which thou desirest. Nothing now remains
Save to unfold the way. But, first of all,
Swear that thou wilt not swerve to right or left,
Nor falter in thy purpose for one hour,
Nor loiter on thy journey anywhere,
Except I bid thee, howsoever bright
The glitter of the prize that from the track
Would lure thy footsteps into other paths
More seeming-fair. For I forewarn thee well,
Thou shalt be tempted sorely, in such wise
As thou mayst least resist. Wherefore, take heed
Unto thyself, that from the first assault
Temptation find thee hard as adamant.
For know that, started once upon this road,
Necessity impels thee, and thy steps
Become subservient to the rule of Fate,
Each following each, in ordered sequence sure,
Unpausing, unreturning, absolute,
Inexorable, not to be delayed
By fear or favour, chance or circumstance,
Pleasure or pain :—for, if thy purpose fail,
If thou delay, or doubt, or turn aside,

Such is the nature of thy task, that none,—
Not I myself,—may pluck thee from thy doom,
But thou must die in the Unshapen Land.'

"And reverently I swear a solemn oath
To Hermes, and Athené, and to Zeus ;
Which ended, thus resumed the Maid divine :

 'Far in the Western Ocean lies an isle
Where dwell the daughters of the Evening Star ;
To them must thou betake thyself, and crave
Their counsel and their guidance. They are wise,
And they shall show thee where the Gorgons dwell,
Hard by the utmost limit of the world.

—And now, depart ; for even as I speak,
The sands that mark the long-predestined hour
When he that slays the Gorgon must set out
On his adventurous quest, are dwindling down
To the last grain : for know, that only he
Who in this one sole hour shall venture forth,
Hath any power at all against her life :
And if, ere yet it fall, thy tardy hand
Pluck not the fruit of Opportunity,
Which now, full-ripe, hangs trembling on the bough,

Then shall she live till all the world be done,
And thou thyself shalt perish in her stead :
For thus the Fates decree. Nor let the thought
Of Danae disturb, or hold thee back,
For I myself will guard and comfort her,
And shield her from all ill.—The hour is come :
Leap boldly from the cliff, and get thee gone !’

“ Scarce had she ceased, ere, from the giddy height,
Forward I sprang : and, lightly as a bird,
The wingéd sandals bare me through the air,
Aloft between the ocean and the sky,
So that I soared and floated as in dreams,
Far out towards the sunset and the blue
That girdles round the sunlit Cyclades.

“ And after many wanderings in strange lands
Far in the North,—among strange men, whose
speech
I understood not, and strange beasts, whose rage
I quelled with Herpé and mine own right hand,—
O’er frozen plains of everlasting ice,
O’er trackless wastes of rocks and desert sand,

Through Hyperborean cold and Libyan heat
Hunger and thirst, and perils manifold,
I passed,—till, on the bleak Iberian coast
I heard the shoreless Western waters moan ;
O'er which, for seven whole days and nights, I flew
On tireless wing, and, but some hours ago,
Sighting the land, made hither, and am come
Safely at last, through three long years of toil,
To crave your counsel and implore your aid."

BOOK II.

HOW THE NYMPHS SOUGHT TO TURN PERSEUS FROM HIS QUEST.

THUS did the son of Danae unfold
His wondrous story to the listening Nymphs ;
Whereat they marvelled greatly, questioning
Of this and that with eager interest.
Yet ever as he told them more and more,
It seemed to him as though some hidden hope,
Some secret expectation, yet untold,
Impelled the anxious questions of the three
Touching his mission, and the several Gods
He saw ere starting ;—whether he was come
For any other cause, save only this,
To slay the Gorgon ? Was there naught beside ?
No secondary purpose in this quest,

He had not yet unveiled? As each reply
Gave more and more precision to the tale,
A shade of disappointment, settling down
On the fair faces of his auditors,
Grew plainly visible, as when the moon,
Dimmed by some passing mist, looks palely forth
In watery indistinctness,—and, at last,
The eldest Nymph thus straitly questioned him :

“ Hast thou not seen our father Hesperus ?
For oftentimes he shineth in the East,
Though witless men mistake his changing face,
And call him Phosphorus the Prince of Morn.
Hath he not sent thee to abide with us
The lone Hesperides, who, age on age,
Live prisoned in this island paradise ?
For none of all the Nymphs, save only we,
Dwell thus in everlasting solitude,
Alone, companioned but by woods and waves.
And but this very evening, while we sang
Our nightly song about the sacred tree
That bears the golden apples, did we pray
To him our father in our loneliness,

Beseeching him to send us, of his love,
Some one of Gods or men to comfort us :—
And lo ! thou camest.—Surely thou art he !”

And all the Nymphs besought him earnestly,
Saying, “ Abide with us : for verily
It cannot be our father sends thee not :
For, save by his express permission, none
May reach these shores ; and therefore, as we
deem,

Thou comest less from Pallas than from him ;
Although, perchance, he hath prevailed with her
To send thee hither from the distant East,
On this same pretext of a seeming quest :
Whereof the very nature of thy task
Is strongest proof : for none of mortal race
—As Hermes and Athené know full well,—
May slay Medusa. Had the Gods above
In very deed and sooth ordained her death,
Themselves had slain her. Wherefore we are sure
Thou art none else save he for whom we wait,
That same companion whom our father sends,
Thrice welcome, oft-expected, long desired.”

They ceased : and Perseus gently made reply :
“ Nay, lovely Nymphs, I saw not Hesperus,
Nor any other of the blessed Gods
Save Hermes and Athené. This one deed,
This only, came I hither to essay,
To slay Medusa or myself be slain.”

“ Alas ! ” they cried, “ thou goest to thy death !
Yet, if indeed our father sends thee not,
And if thine evil fate constraineth thee
To thy destruction, wherefore wilt thou rush
Headlong upon thy doom ? Abide with us
A little while, at most a year or twain :
So shall we know one moment’s happiness,
And thou too shalt be happy ere thou die.”

Then Perseus, gazing on the radiant Nymphs,
Felt sudden sorrow fasten on his soul
With icy clutch ; and thus regretfully
One moment’s space he mused within his mind.
“ May I not linger here a little while,
With these bright beings in this peaceful land,
The dwelling of the South wind and the sun,

Where every fairest phantom of the soul
Takes visible form and blushes into life,
As in that dim Elysium of the brain
Whereto Man passes through the gates of Sleep,
Too soon, alas ! too soon to wake again
To earth and self ? Why must I pass away
More swiftly than a vision of the morn,
From these most tranquil shores of happiness,
Far out of sight or sound or memory
Of these that love me. Surely I may rest
A little while,—and yet, it may not be.”

Then, breaking from his thoughts, he made reply :
“Nay, sweetest Nymphs, I cannot stay with ye
Except Athené wills it.—Fain, most fain,
Were I to linger in this charmed isle,
The like whereof, for beauty and for peace,
It never yet hath been my lot to see
In all my wanderings.—Fain would I remain
With you, ye fairest of the race divine,
For lives on lives,—ay, for eternity.
But swiftly as I come must I depart :
No swallow, in her passage to the South,

Lighting one instant on a trireme's mast,—
No butterfly, afloat upon the breeze,—
Flits by more quickly. Like a morning dream
I come, and like a dream must I depart."

"Alas!" said they, "how poor a thing is life,
Yea even life immortal! Wilt thou go?
And shall we lose thee almost ere we find?
O Change, is this the shadow of thy wings?
Hast thou then found us? Will Death follow next?
Alas, we know not and we cannot know!
For all foreknowledge is but as a lamp
That with obscure and fitful radiance sheds
A little glimmering circle in the dark,
Illumining but for a few brief steps
The devious path that stretches far away,
League beyond league into the Limitless,
Within whose vast impenetrable realms
Is nothing certain save eternal Change,
Which was from the beginning, and shall be
Till Time be done,—with unrelaxing speed
Still labouring slowly onward evermore
To some dim consummation, unattained,

And unattainable, that still eludes
Her flying feet. Yea, even Zeus himself
Hath power alone on Chance and Circumstance,
Nor can he burst the trebly-welded bonds
That knit the brazen links of Destiny
In sure remorseless sequence, each to each :
For Destiny is but perpetual Change,
And that which hath beginning also ends,
And Gods give place to Gods, as Night to
Day,

Obedient to the inexorable Law
Of Alternation, by whose fixed decree
Each several state implies its opposite,
And every cause its destined consequence.
For each succeeding order blindly springs
From that which was,—in that which is to be
Slow-merging,—seed-like, in predestined course,
Passing from tender germ to flower and fruit,
First green, then mellowing in September suns
To full maturity ; then, over-ripe,
Regenerating from its own decay
The blossom and the fruit of other years,
And from the fruit the seed of years to come,

Which ever varieth somewhat from the old,
In kind identical, yet still distinct
In quality, and diverse in degree :
Changed gradually, or for good or ill,
Better or worse, through each succeeding round
Of cyclic variation, by the force
Of Accident, that quickens or retards,
Develops or degrades as Nature wills,—
By stress of individual circumstance
Evolving ever from the primal type
Another, differing as the Fates decree.

“Thus, out of Chaos, Uranus and Ge
Sprang in the night of Time : and, after these,
Came Cronos and the Titans ; whence again
Sprang Father Zeus and the immortal Gods :—
Who knoweth yet if this be still the end,
Or whether these in turn shall pass away ?

“What matters it ?—Our life is sorrowful :
Our loneliness is more than we can bear.
Let come whatever will,—or Change, or Death,
We care not greatly. Thou hast told thy tale :

Far other is it than we hoped to hear,
Yet let it pass. Hearken thou now to ours.

“A thousand years in this enchanted isle
Have we the daughters of the Evening Star
Lived on in utter loneliness, remote
Alike from Gods and men : nor yet, till now,
Have we beheld the face of mortal man,
Save only Atlas, who on yonder peak
In uncomplaining durance ever kneels,
Holding the heavens and the earth apart.
And but a while ago we were content,
Nor ever longed for more companionship
Than our own selves : but yet there came an hour
When one sole thought possessed the mind of each,
And each in silence brooded over it,
Deeming herself alone in discontent,
And—wandering forth by unfrequented ways,—
Held solitary converse with her soul,
In fitful strains of gentle melancholy,
And musical complainings strange and sweet,
And words that clothed in clear articulate shape
Dim dreams that hardly seemed to touch the brain

With vaguest consciousness,—till every crag,
And every babbling echo of the grove,
Roused from their trance, took voice, and answered us
With mocking utterance of secret thoughts
Uprising to the lips, ere yet the mind
Half grasped them,—visions born of loneliness,
And tender passionate dreams of unknown Love.

“And so, it happened once, upon a day,
Each one of us had strayed away alone,
This way and that among the myrtle-brakes,
Each communing with her unuttered thought
In silence, or in broken bursts of song,
Voicing her musings to the voiceless woods
And unresponsive caverns : till, at last,
Our aimless steps, converging, neared a spot,—
A hollow valley, closed with walls of rock
To right and left,—which, narrowing to a pass
To northwards, ends in one sheer precipice,
O'er which a little brawling rivulet
Rushes impetuously, and spends itself
In finest spray upon the rocks beneath,
Then hurries down the valley towards the sea

To southward, where the beetling crags diverge
And lose themselves in undulating slopes
Of stony hillocks, clad with tangled copse
And trailing clematis : and all the vale
Is ambushed thick with pine and underbrush,
Where lurks the hare, and where the timid deer
Find shade and refuge from the noonday heat.

“ A silent haunt of sylvan solitude
And pensive thought, yet full of slumbering sound,
That ever dozes nigh to wakening,—
The home of countless echoes, whose quick voice
Takes up the warbling of the nightingale,
The petulant yelping of the angry fox,
The hootings of the melancholy owl,—
Or whatsoever smallest sound invades
The solemn hush of those mysterious aisles
Of vast columnar pine-trunks, roofed above
With many a deep-groined arch of sombre boughs,—
Till every bush and every caverned crag,
From mouth to apex of the garrulous glen,
Joins in the mimic chorus, and repeats
Yet once again the oft-repeated note.

Here, then, we sat us down, each one of us
Unseen of both the others, and began
Half earnestly, half sporting with our grief,
To tell our sorrows to the senseless voice
That answers though it cannot understand.
When lo! a strange confusion of laments
Broke on our ears. 'Ah, woe!' 'Alas, alas!'
'Unhappy Ægle!' 'Lone Hesperia!'
'Ah, luckless Arethusa!' wailed the voice
In mournful oft-reiterated tone,
Then slowly sank and sobbed itself away,
But soon, awakening, rose and wailed again,
'Ah, living death!' 'Oh Love!' 'Oh loneliness!'
'Ah, wretched doom!' 'Ah, solitary life!'

"At last one cried, 'Sweet sisters, is it ye?'
And Echo, with her hundred voices, caught
The notes, and cried, 'Sweet sisters, is it ye?'
Then 'Sisters, is it ye?' and 'Is it ye?'
And 'Is it ye?' more faintly, till the storm
Of question died: and one made answer, 'Yea.'
—And Echo smote the answer down the vale,
And on it bounded, like a glancing ball,

Athwart the narrow glen, from side to side
Alternately reverberating down
The rough and difficult throttle of the gorge,
Buffeted to and fro by cave and crag,
On to the widening entrance of the pass,
Then outward, streaming over hill and dale,
Diffused and drifted, like a breaking mist
Slow-sailing down the land-wind out to sea.

“ Thus was the secret trouble of our souls
Revealed, and each one uttered forth her thought,
Each marvelling to find her own desires
Reflected in her sisters', as the lake
Mirrors the mist that eddies over it.
And somewhat lightened was our sorrow's load
By utterance : for the hidden grief that sleeps
Deep in the soul still labours to the lips,
With many a travail-pang and voiceless throe,
And being born in speech is half-assuaged.
And thus it was with us : the weariness
And ache of unparticipated pain
Passed like a cloud that breaks before the wind :
And once again did life seem beautiful,

Yet with a beauty other than of old,
Half-mournful, always leavened with a lack,
As of some missing savour in the cup
That dulls the fiery draught,—a subtle sense
Of want and incompleteness such as mars
The loveliness of half-developed buds
And sterile flowers.

So sped the lingering years,
Slowly as those white banks of pearly cloud
High up within the windless dome of blue,
That lazily, across a listless sky,
Float flecked with hues of sunset, when the day
Glides gently down the slopes of afternoon,
And land and sea lie drowned in languid heat.

Not wholly darkened, yet not wholly bright,
Life, like an April morn of shine and shower,
Drew softly onward with the dreaming years,
In faultless sameness, restful weariness,
And sick satiety of empty peace :—
Till but an hour ago we saw thy face,
And Life no longer seemed the tempting rind
Of watery fruits insipid to the taste,
But strong with subtlest savour strange and rare,

Even as the apples of yon magic tree,
Whereof if any man shall pluck and eat,
Yea even the smallest morsel of the least,
He shall not hunger more for seven days.
And as we brought thee hither to our home,
It seemed as if the spirit of this isle,
That slept these thousand years, awoke with thee
To light and life and laughter as of love,
And joyous morning songs of lusty youth.
Thy voice was as sweet music in our ears,
And all the earth grew sunny in thy smile,
And every ravenous yearning of the heart
Affrighted spread abroad its dusky wings,
And, bat-like, fled before the rising morn,
Into the mouldering dungeons of the Past,
Never again we deemed to issue forth
Into the sparkling sunlight of the soul,
With shade obscene and dismal croaking scream
Scaring the timorous steps of infant Joy.—
Ay, for one little hour we were content,
Even as one that finds a priceless gem,
And finds it but to lose. Alas, alas!
Why wilt thou leave us in our loneliness?

Are we not gentle, kind and beautiful?
Time hath no power upon us. Age on age
Shalt thou behold these features still the same,
Nor shalt thou miss one charm till earth be done :
And thou shalt be our master and our lord,
And we will love and serve and honour thee,
And pray for thee to Hera, Queen of Heaven,
And to thine own dread sire, Almighty Zeus,
That they should grant thee immortality
And deathless youth like ours.—Oh stay with us !
For even though the envious Gods refuse
The draught of fiery nectar which instils
Immortal life into the mortal frame,—
Though this indeed were scarcely possible,
Seeing that thy father ruleth over all,—
Yet still a lesser gift is ours to give,
Not small indeed, nor lightly to be spurned,
Yet poor had we but power to give thee more :
For know, O Perseus, that thou canst not die,
Nor yet grow old like Eos' luckless spouse,
So long as thou dost eat this magic fruit :
And thou shalt have it all, save only three,
Those three mysterious globes of living gold,

Ge's gift to Hera on her marriage-day,
Whereon the destinies of Gods and men
Hang trembling in the balance of the Fates :
For all save these are ours to take at will,
Or give to whomsoever we shall choose ;
And, over and above the fateful three,
There are a thousand and five hundred more,
Each one of which is as a year of life,
And these are thine. We swear it by the Styx "

And sorrowfully Perseus answered them :
" O loveliest of the daughters of the Gods,
No cooling draught from ice-wells underground
Pressed to the lips of him that dies of thirst,
Were welcomer than this thrice-happy fate
Wherewith ye tempt me, sorely, but in vain.
For none may strive with Destiny. My doom
Constrains me, and I cannot turn aside
To right or left, or lay me down and rest,
Or loiter but one moment on the road,
Until I reach the end of this strange path,
Whereon my feet are set, for weal or woe,
Even to the death. I have sworn a fearful oath

To Hermes and Athené, which to break
Were foulest sacrilege : and, furthermore,—
Yea though Athené loosed me from my bond,
Which is impossible,—my plighted word
Stands firm as adamant, and spurs me on
Whether I will or no : for that rash vow
Wherewith King Polydectes craftily
Ensnared me, binds my soul in brazen links
Which cannot be unloosed, or cast aside,
Save by performance.—Basely, guilefully,
He plotted to entrap me to my death,
By craving such a gift as mortal man—
Save by the help of the immortal Gods,—
Might never win and live : but none the less,
Although he be the vilest of mankind,
Nor ever yet kept faith with any man,
Still must I hazard all, yea life itself,
To keep my troth with him inviolate :
For though he be a liar and a knave,
Yet am I none : and that which I have sworn
Will I perform unto the uttermost.”

“ Alas ! ” they answered, “ wherefore wilt thou die

To pleasure one who basely plots thy death,
And, daring not to slay thee openly,
Befools thee with a juggling craft of words,
And from thine own bright honour shapes the shaft
That strikes thy life? Lo now, how wise thou art,
To court destruction at thy foe's behest!
What bird that sees the fowler lime his twigs
Flies senselessly into the slippery snare?
Why then, forsooth, must thou keep faith and troth
With traitors and false cowards, whose sole end
Is but to rid themselves of thee? Beware
Lest, matching artless truth with cunning fraud,
Thou strain the point of honour overmuch
To thine own ruin. Not the Gods themselves,
Whose word is ever sacred, deign to keep
Faith with the faithless. Wherefore then shouldst
thou?

Wilt thou be truer than the truthful Gods,
And wiser than the wisest? O brave lore!
Surely, if all men else be wise as thou,
Small wonder is it that the mirthful Gods
Make careless mockery of the foolish woes
Of those thrice-blinded, self-tormenting worms,

That ever weary them with ceaseless plaint,
Craving with tedious importunity
Deliverance from the ills themselves have wrought,
The necessary fruit of wrath and wrong,
Crass folly, pride, and wilful ignorance.

“Yet pardon us if these our words offend :
They were not meant in anger or in scorn,
But rather from the pain of anguished minds,—
Children of sorrow, not of bitterness,—
Sprang idly to the lips, at unawares.
Not willingly would we seem proud or vain,
Or vaunt our hapless immortality,
Which now that thou wilt leave us, seems a load
Wellnigh too hard and heavy to be borne.
We would not utter one reproachful word,
Or think so much as one ungentle thought :
For that which thou desirest, we desire,
And all things shall be even as thou wilt,
Although our hearts should break for loss of thee.
And we will speed thee on thy dangerous road
With surest counsel and with readiest aid.
And if, perchance, at times, our selfish grief

Should cloud thy spirit with reflected gloom,
Or prompt our tongues to ill-considered speech,
Bear with us, for our souls are sick to death
With blighted hope, and the long restless ache
Of dull despair and loss and loneliness."

Thereat they fell to weeping bitterly,
And strange and pitiful it was to see
Tears as of human sorrow rise and dim
The lustrous depths of those immortal eyes,
So wildly sweet, so innocently true,
So wise, and yet so diffidently shy,
In virgin modesty. And answering tears,
For all his manhood, stole to Perseus' eyes
Unbidden, at the woful spectacle
Of that divinest grief of things divine
Yet still half-human, wholly feminine,
Not stonily serene and passionless
As are the greater Gods that rule on high;
Less awful, yet more beautiful, instinct
With every rarest grace that most adorns
The earthly beauty of a mortal maid.—
And falteringly Perseus made reply :

“ O ye, at once the fairest and the best,
Gentlest and sweetest of that lovely race
Wherein are mingled all the varied charms
Of Goddess and of woman,—Oh ! believe
How gladly would I do or suffer aught,
Yea at your lightest word, save only this !
And deadly is the struggle and the pang
With which my shrinking and reluctant will
Renounces this so perfect happiness,—
The greatest, as I deem, that man may know
In dream, or yet in deed, in earth or heaven.
For know that, of my own unfettered choice,
Before all other gifts the Gods can give,
Myself would freely choose this very boon,
And count no price too dear that purchased it
Save cowardice, dishonour, and deceit :
Wherewith, if I were vile and base enough
To soil my soul, then were I no fit mate
For such as ye are.—Hear me, I beseech !
Hear me, and judge !—If I accomplish not
This deed that I have sworn to execute,—
Unless, indeed, I die attempting it,—
What am I but a by-word, a reproach,

A target for the arrows of red scorn,
A vaunter of the deed I dare not do,
A lying braggart and a perjured knave,
Unworthy any trust or fellowship
With Gods or men,—and least of all, with ye,—
Outcast, despised, utterly reprobate,
A craven and a dastard and a fool?

“How could ye love or honour such an one?
—Therefore, because this gift ye proffer me
Is in mine eyes the greatest of all gifts,—
Because of all things rare and beautiful
Ye are the very crown and flower of all,—
I must forego ye. Never yet, till now,
Though somewhat have I suffered, did I know
At what strange cost,—what black and bitter cost,—
Man cleaves to Right and Duty.—Night and day,
Yea, though I live till earth herself be dead,
Your voices echoing down the empty years,
Through waste and desert spaces of the soul,
Will break upon my slumber, and your songs
Ring wailing through the halls of Memory
Winged with the passionate sweetness of Regret,—

Your faces rise betwixt me and the dark,
Peopling the night with phantoms,—haunting me
With tenderest images of ruined love,
Glad beyond words, fair beyond any dream,
Dearer than hope, yet hopeless as despair.

“Lo I have spoken! Hear ye then and judge.—
No longer is there any grief or woe
Hath power upon me more to shake or sting :
For deeper depth of pain than this is none,
To rise in arms against the soul’s desire
And slay it, that the soul itself may live.”

Thereat, they raised their faces wet with tears,
And gazed on Perseus mutely for a space,
In mournful admiration, strangely mixed
With awe-struck wonder and astonishment
That thus the stedfast will of mortal man
Should lord it o’er his senses, thrusting them
Out of the path of Duty loftily ;
With stern determination, unassailed
By doubt or fear or question of defeat,
Choosing the steep and briary road of Right,

With fixed imperious purpose, to the end.

Then thus spake Ægle, eldest of the Nymphs ;
" The Gods above are strong and pitiless ;
That which they will they do, or right or wrong,
And none may move or alter their decrees,
For good or ill, save only Destiny.
Small wonder and small merit is the strength
Of will that springs from arbitrary power,
Which, suffering naught, and heeding naught, effects
Its purpose without let or obstacle,
Turning the ponderous wheels that move the spheres
With easy levers, at no slightest cost
To its own self of labour, toil, or pain,
Renunciation, sorrow, or distress,
Or aught, except volition absolute.
But different far is that high dominance
Of Reason over natural appetite
Whereby a mortal, suffering mortal pain,
Compels the thrall'd and subjugated sense
To bow before the sceptre of the soul
And do it homage, though the soul itself
By this same action, of deliberate choice,

Closes the door of light for evermore,
And roams away in darkness and despair,
Lampless and hopeless, towards some cheerless goal
Of blank unlovely duty. Nobler far,—
Thrice greater, and thrice worthier,—is the will
That, conquering all things, conquers first itself,
Heedless alike of self-inflicted pain,
Or bait of tempting pleasure, spurned aside,
And self-refused, for Right and Duty's sake,
Than that which, clothed in calm omnipotence,
Acts as it wills, and fashions Right and Wrong
This way or that, of uncontrolled caprice,—
Indifferent, ordering all things for itself.

“Therefore, O Perseus, do we honour thee,—
Thee, clad in mortal frailty, hedged about
With limitation, sorrow, doubt and death,—
As Zeus himself: for thou hast taught us this,
How great and godlike, far beyond all Gods,
Is Man, that, seeing Duty, follows her.”

Then all the Nymphs, arising mournfully,
Kissed Perseus on the forehead, with a kiss

Solemn and holy,—such as sisters give
To some belovéd brother doomed to die,—
And took him by the hand, and led him forth
Into another chamber, panelled round
With scented cedar-wood, and, overhead,
Ceiled with deep-vaulted turquoise,—like the sky,
Flecked thickly o'er with dust of golden stars,—
And floored with ebony : and in the midst
They spread a silken couch of softest down,
And over it rich purple coverings :
And, joining hands, they circled round it thrice,
Singing the while some unknown melody,
Which Perseus understood not. Then one spake :

“O friend, thou askest us to counsel thee,
Yet though in many things our lore is deep,
We see not aught save clouds and rolling mist,
And blackness as of night before the eyes
That fain would search the future for some path
Of safety, by the which thou might'st escape
The doom that lies before thee. We have said
This night, already, that we know not how
A mortal man may slay Medusa,—yet

There still remains one solitary light
Of counsel, that may snatch thee from thy doom.
More arms thou needest than the Gods have given,
Yet what they are we cannot surely tell.
Abide thou here until to-morrow morn,
For this same chamber is the sanctuary
Of Ge, the great Earth-Mother, who doth love
The race of men : and we have prayed for thee,
That she should send thee counsel in thy dreams.
Sleep, therefore, and pay wary heed thereto :
For if thou dreamest naught, or dost forget,
Or if our wisdom cannot fathom them,
Then art thou dead, beyond all hope or help,
Either of us or the immortal Gods."

Then slowly from the chamber passed the three,
But at the threshold turned and sighed "Fare-
well !

And be thy dreams prophetic. Ask of Ge
And she shall send thee visions from the Gate
Of Horn, and not from that of Ivory.
For those that issue through the first are true,
Not fair perchance, yet mirrors of those things

That are, and shall be, helpful, ominous :
But those that come from out the Ivory Gate,
Are false as beautiful, children of lies,
Lighter than air, emptier than nothingness,
Delusive, hurtful to the sons of men."

And Perseus lifted up his hands and prayed
To Ge, and to Athené, and to Zeus :
And, as he prayed, a rattling thunder-peal
Rang shattering through the cloudless midnight sky
To northwards, and a fiery meteor shot
Down from Olympus' golden battlements,
In fashion like an eagle, hovering
Half-way 'twixt earth and sky : from right to left
It passed, descending swiftly, till it hung
Blazing above the dark horizon-line,
Where the long levels of the moony deep
Died dreamily into the dome of air,
And on behind the mountain westward sped,
Across the Streams of Ocean, and the waste
That lies about the limits of the world,
Far down beyond the sunset, and the halls
Of Twilight, and the glimmering gulfs of Space.

Then Perseus laid him down and slept till morn,
For he was weary : and three several times
Did light-winged dreams, the messengers of truth,
Flit round his head. The first, Athené sent :
The second, issuing from the dusky womb
Of Ge, the great Earth-Mother, like a cloud,
Pregnant with April rain and kindly showers,
Whose moisture brings new life to drooping herbs
And withering flowers, spread wide its feathery
wings,
And, mounting, floated through the Gate of Horn,
Then, fluttering earthward, steeped the dreamer's
sense
In dews of saving knowledge : and the third
Arose from underneath the golden throne,
Whence Zeus, Almighty Sire of Gods and men,
Rules, high above all worlds : and at his nod,
Rushed, in one burst of loud tempestuous song,
On through the Gate of Truth, and, like the shower
Of gold, wherein his mother Danae
Conceived him, rained its notes on Perseus' soul
In thunderous hymns of praise and victory.

BOOK III.

HOW PERSEUS DREAMED THREE DREAMS.

THE sun hung close below the Eastern verge,
When Perseus woke upon the morrow morn ;
And clear against the sharp horizon-line
That marked the outline of the watery waste
Arose the first faint flushes of the dawn,
As star by star paled in the gathering grey
Fast mingling with the duskier hues of dark.
And close beside his couch the maidens three,
One at the foot, and one on either side,
Stood, sable-robed, and silent as the night,
Watching his wakening : pale they seemed and sad,
Yet calm and thoughtful ; their soft luminous eyes
Shone dreamily, as shines the wintry moon
Ringed round with vaporous halos, when the air
Is thick with frost, and every leafless bough

Gleams white with silvery stars of sparkling rime.
Then Ægle,—she that stood beside his feet,—
Spoke, and her accents sounded hushed and low,
Far off, yet audible : “Declare thy dreams,
And quickly : for the ocean of my soul,
In this same hour, is windless, clear, and still :
Cast thou thereon the shadows of thy sleep,
And it shall glass their meaning back to thee.”

Then Perseus answered, “Hearken, lovely Nymphs !
Three several times last night I dreamed a dream,
If dreams indeed they were,—for such as these
I never dreamt before, save only once,
What time Athené first appeared to me
At Samos : vivid were they, and distinct
As aught that chances in the daytime life
Whereof Man’s waking sense takes cognizance.
And though indeed the full significance
Of all I saw is hidden from mine eyes,
Yet still its purport seemeth to be good,
And doubtless ye shall soon unravel it :
For surely, as I deem, the blessed Gods
Have sent me light, according to your prayers.

“On this wise was the fashion of the first.
Methought I saw the image of myself
That stood beside Athené, on the cliffs
Near Polydectes' palace, at the spot
Where last I saw her : and she smiled on me,
Saying, ‘O hero, bravely hast thou done
Thy task, and well am I content with thee.
Now give me back the sandals and the sword,
And from thy shoulders take my burnished shield
And lay it on the ground in front of thee,
Face uppermost ; and in the midst thereof
Place that thou bearest in thy goatskin bag.’
Then I unloosed the sandals and the sword,
And gave them to her, and from off my back
Took down the polished mirror of the shield,
And laid it on the ground and gazed therein
Upon mine own reflected countenance,
And up again into Athené's eyes,
Saying, ‘O fair and pure, thou knowest well
This bag that should have held the Gorgon's head
Is empty :’ but she answered, ‘Nay, not so.’
And, even as she spake, behold the bag
Grew heavy, and I thrust my hand therein,

And from its depths drew forth the Gorgon's head,
And set it in the centre of the shield,
Whereto it clave, becoming one with it,
A horrid boss upon the gleaming disc,
So ghastly that I turned mine eyes away
For very dread : and, when I looked again,
It was not there, nor Pallas,—but I stood
Alone upon the cliffs, and, wondering, turned
My footsteps homeward to my mother's house
And entered ;—if indeed that shape was I :
For though it seemed none other than myself,
Yet in my dream a double consciousness
Possessed me : I it was, and yet not I :
And I myself, spectator of myself,
Audience at once and actor, played my part,
Yet played it not, but rather saw it played,
Not by myself, but by some other self,
Whose deeds I did, yet did not. When the shape
Had passed the threshold of my mother's door,
All vanished : and deep slumber sealed my sense.

“Again a second time I dreamed a dream.
And lo ! a mighty cavern underground,

High-vaulted as the sky, and dark as night,
Save for the feeble glimmer of a lamp
That stood beside me in a tiny niche
Fringed round with gleaming stalactites :—afar,
I heard the roar of cataracts thundering
Sullenly through dim subterranean vaults,
Whereto unnumbered branching passages
Led from the central chamber, where I stood
Waiting as though for someone that should come,
Yet came not. Hour on hour with leaden feet
In slow succession, lingering, came and passed :
And soon my eyes accustomed to the gloom
Plumbed the long reaches of the brooding dark
With searching looks of anxious scrutiny,
Yet saw but glittering points of gold or gem,
Vast natural columns, labyrinthine aisles,
And snow-white petrifications drooping down
From wall and arch, or sprouting from the ground,
In multitudinous forms of beast and bird,
And fish, and men, and women, rudely limned
In shapes grotesque and hideous attitudes,
With countenances strange and sinister :
Wherewith the walls and floor were covered thick,

So that the cavern seemed a gallery
Stored with uncouth fantastic statuary
That aped, as if by some wild natural freak,
The outward semblance of all living things.
And ever, as the tedious moments passed,
There grew within my mind a formless dread
Of that blank nothingness and stony death
That hemmed me round about on every side :
And never did I think again to see
The wholesome daylight of the upper air.
And, as I peered about the cheerless den,
A dark abhorrence of those soulless shapes
That grinned and writhed in passive mockery
Possessed my spirit, and a subtle sense
As of the presence of some evil thing
That sought me. Straightway had I left the spot
But that I knew not where to turn my steps.
And so I waited on a weary while,
Until my limbs grew numbed with iron cold,
And hardly could I move my stiffening joints :
And from the roof chill petrifying drops
Of stone-charged water slowly oozed, and dripped
Upon my head, congealing as they fell :

And then I thought, 'Lo ! here shall I remain
Until this water freeze me into stone.'

“ And almost had my sense deserted me,
And hardly did I feel myself alive
More than those marble images of death
That clustered round me in their grim repose,
When, far away, along the echoing sides
Of a vast stony corridor, whose arch
Yawned in the rocky wall hard by, I caught
The muffled sound of footsteps nearing me :
And vainly did I strive to raise a shout
For help, but could not ; for my rigid tongue
Refused its office, and, immovable,
Lay rooted in the inarticulate vault
Of my dumb mouth. Nearer the footsteps came ;
And, ever as they neared, the rocky floor
With resonant murmur and deep rumbling groan
Quaked, vibrating beneath their ponderous tread,
As though some huge and elephantine bulk
Smote on its stony immobility
With hurrying impact of enormous mass
In headlong motion. Then from out the gloom,—

Stooping her lofty head that far o'ertopped
The utmost height of that tall arch,—emerged
The figure of a giant woman, vast
Beyond imagination, towering
Above me like a pine : her stately head
Rose to the cavern's roof : her ample breast
Broad as the base of some great mountain, heaved
Slowly, like waves of undulating corn,
Swayed by the whispering breezes of the West.

“ She sat her down beside me on the ground,
Then gently raised me in her mighty arms
And rocked me on her bosom like a child :
And warmth and life and vivifying heat
Coursed through my frozen limbs, unloosing them
From that dread bond of adamant cold :
And, bending over me her solemn face
Large, dark, and lovely as some fertile land
That dreams beneath the kisses of the moon
In slumberous nights of summer, when the earth
Is rich with plenteous growth of fruits and grain,
She kissed me softly with a balmy kiss
Of winds and odorous scents of flowering thyme,

And bursting buds and kindly dews of spring,—
Then spake,—and as the murmur of the boughs
In sunlit woodland valleys was her voice.

“‘O son, what dost thou in this hall of death,
Among these hapless mockeries of life,
Sad victims of Medusa’s awful eyes?—
My children,—once so warm and beautiful,
So bright and joyous in the teeming smile
Of me, the great Earth-Mother,—now so cold
In everlasting slumber, compassed round
With cruel bands and gyves of senseless stone.
What dost thou, living, in this home of death,
Whence nothing born of me can issue forth
With life, except I come to succour it?
What mad infatuation lures thee here
To fell Medusa’s dreadful gallery
Of marble trophies? Fearful is the art
Of her, the ghastly sculptor of these forms,
Not wrought of stone or marble, but transformed
From living beings by the baleful glare
Of those unholy thrice-accurséd orbs
Wherewith she chills to stone the shuddering limbs

Of all that look upon her.—Come, my son,
And let me bear thee back to light and life.'

"Once more she kissed me, and beneath her kiss
My frozen tongue and pale immobile lips
Were thawed and loosened as by sunny winds,
And, hoarsely stammering, thus I answered her :

" 'Great Ge, sweet Mother of the race of men,
Bountiful, ever-loving, ever kind,
I know not wholly wherefore I am here,
Or who hath brought me hither to this place
So lamentable, strange, and piteous :
This only do I know, that I am come
To rid the groaning and tormented earth
Of that same fearful artist who hath wrought
These devilish nightmare shapes, or stand myself
In this doomed hall of impious statuary.'

" 'Nay,' answered Ge, ' fling not away thy life
Thus uselessly : one solitary way,
And one alone, of all ways possible
Is there, whereby Medusa may be slain,

And that I know not ; therefore rest content
With deeds more suited to the feeble powers
Of mortal man. I would not thou shouldst
die,

For fair art thou, and valiant, O my son ;
And I have need of such for many a deed,
Glorious, yet less impossible than this.'

" Then spake I, ' This one deed, and this alone,
Must I accomplish first, before all else.
Didst thou not say, O Mother, well-beloved,
Even now, that this my task was possible,
Though difficult : yet if but possible,
Surely in heaven above, or earth beneath,
Or in the Shades below, that knowledge lies
Which whoso gaineth and doth wisely use
Shall still prevail. The Gods have given me
Herpé the sword, these sandals and this shield :
And if I can but strike with Herpé once,
Small need, I trow, will be to strike again ;
For naught that liveth may resist its edge,
No, nor dead matter, iron, brass, or stone,—
Yea, even the Immortals will it wound :

—Yet stay,—for proof is worth a thousand words,—
Behold and judge thou if it be not so.’

“Then, climbing downwards from her huge embrace,

Some twenty steps across the gloomy hall
I came upon a statue like a man,
That gaped upon me with wide-open jaws,
And vacant eyeballs staring horribly :
Massive it was, of half-gigantic mould,
Thick as the gnarled bole of some great oak,
And hideous as a satyr. Then I turned,
Saying, ‘O Mother, can these live again
If she that slew them perish by my hand?’
Whereat she sighed, and sadly answered : ‘Nay :
Stone are they as thou seest, cold and dead,
And stone must they remain for evermore.’

“Forthwith I drew bright *Herpé* from my thigh,
Whirled her aloft, and, with one trenchant sweep,
Smote full upon the forehead of the thing :
And lo ! through all the mass of stubborn stone,
As though it were but water, shore the blade ;

And backward toppling from its pedestal,
Cleft clean in twain, straight downward through
the chine,

The ponderous statue rolled, and crashed, and fell,
Shattering and clattering, on the rocky floor.

And every hollow vault and corridor,
Through all that vast cavernous dungeon, shook
Muttered and roared and crashed in unison.

“ Long on the shapeless trunk of severed stone
The great Earth-Mother fixed her wondering eyes,
Large as the oval of this shining shield,
Divine Athené’s, which she lent to me
For this same venture. Then in words like these
Spake Ge : ‘ O son, thou bearest fearful arms :
And though Medusa’s scales be woven brass,
Yet doubt I not that this dread brand of thine
Will slay her, if thou canst but strike therewith :
Yet herein lies thy chiefest obstacle :—
No mountain eagle that beholds the sun
With steadfast eyes undazzled,—no swift hawk
Reared on Caucasian heights that scale the skies,
Is sharper-sighted than this hag of hell.

And if she fix thee with her baleful glare,
Then art thou sped : for she will follow thee,
And hunt thee as the eagle hunts the hern,
Until she catch thee and thou turnest round
To guard thyself from those sharp brazen claws ;
Then shalt thou look upon her and be lost.

“ ‘ Yet will I strive to win some clue for thee.—
Arise and let us look upon the stars ;
For in the solemn voices of the night
Is help, and wisdom in her myriad eyes.’

“ She ceased : and, rising, struck the vaulted roof
Three several times, so that it cracked and rent
As if an earthquake rocked it. Through the gap
I marked a certain quarter of the sky :
Then, stooping down, she caught and lifted me
And set me on her shoulder, where I stood
Straight underneath the glimmering Pleiades,
And said, ‘ Look upward, quickly, through the rift,
And what thou seest, note, as carefully
As though it were the writing of the Fates.’

“And gazing on the heavens, I answered her :
‘I see a curving line of five bright stars,
That stretches upward from the Pleiades :
And opposite the second, to the right,
Another,—and, methinks, it glows and wanes
Alternately, in strange and fitful wise.’
Then Ge, ‘Yon star shone on Medusa’s birth :
What of the two last stars that end the line,
And specially the fourth, that from the curve
Deviates somewhat?—for that star is thine.’

“Then, as I looked, behold the endmost star
Blazed angrily, and on Medusa’s orb
Rushed headlong, in impetuous career ;
With sparkling gleam and scintillating flash
Enfolding her,—when lo ! it paled, and fell
Heavily, sinking earthwards like a stone.

“Then Ge, ‘Thou seest she hath vanquished him.
Did I not say this deed was perilous ?
What of thy star?—Take not thine eyes there-
from ;
For as thou seest now, so shall it be.’

“Then on the fourth I bent my anxious gaze,
And lo! it was the brightest of the five :
Yet ever as I looked, it dwindled down,
And a thick cloud of darkness, gathering
About it, seemed to hide it from my sight.—
So dense, and deep, and inky was the cloud,
That, where the star had been, a dusky blot
Loomed black against the background of the
night,

Like jet on ebony. Then I shrieked aloud :
‘O Ge, my star is lost and swallowed up
In darkness!’—but she questioned musingly,
‘Cometh that darkness from Medusa’s star?’
And when I answered, ‘Nay ; but from below,’
She cried, ‘Not yet, O Perseus, is the end :
Watch heedfully, and thou shalt learn thy fate.’

“Even as she spake, behold, the dusky blot
Crept onward slowly, like a drifting cloud,
Until it hung above Medusa’s star.
Then from the darkness came a blinding flash,
That smote her full upon the central disc,
So that she sank, and fell into the sea.

“ ‘She falls, O Ge!’ I shouted,—‘Lo she falls!
A thunderbolt hath sped from yon black cloud,
And smitten her to death!—She falls! she falls!’

“Then, lifting from above her empty place,
The black cloud moved and floated back again
To that same region where my star had shone
Before the darkness gathered: and the cloud
Dispersing, showed behind its rending veil
The star that shone yet brighter than before.

“ ‘O Mother Ge,’ I cried, ‘it shines again!—
Yea, clearer than before!’—when, suddenly,
Like smoke dissolved before the freshening breeze,
The vision broke, and faded from my sight.

“And yet a third time did I dream a
dream.—

And lo! I stood alone, upon a star
No bigger than a single mustard-seed,
Which, flashing like a meteor through the sky,
Shot dizzily across the dome of night,
Bearing me on to some strange destiny,
I knew not what,—in some far distant land,

I knew not whither. Yet I felt no fear
Or doubt, but rather joy unspeakable,
And sense of victory won, and of reward,
Earned by some valiant deed, awaiting me.
When suddenly a blare of trumpets brayed,
And instantly there rose a deafening shout
Of clamorous welcome, such as armies raise
To swell the triumph of some conquering king.
'He comes!' it thundered, 'See, the new-made
God!'

And as I gazed around in wonderment,
I saw far down below me, through the void,
The starry walls and golden battlements
Of high Olympus, thronged with forms divine,
Expectant, as of some great spectacle.
And downward, swiftly as the arrowy beams
Of Phoebus, when his coursers wake the morn,
The star whereon I stood, darted and lit
Ten cubits' length within the crystal gate,
Then brake, and crumbled underneath my feet.
And thereupon, from all the godlike throng
Arose a stately chant, melodious
Beyond all sweetest harmonies of earth,

And 'Welcome ! Welcome ! Welcome !' pealed the
strain,

'Lo he is come, our brother, newly born
To Godhead. Sing aloud and welcome him !'
And as I gazed about me, stupefied,
Not knowing where to turn me, Hermes came
And took me by the hand, and led me on
Through the dense throng into an open space,
Where, on a throne of gold and ivory,
Begrammed with pearl and diamond, Hera sat,
And by her side, upon another throne,
Loftier, and robed about with living light,
Almighty Zeus, father of Gods and men.
And Hera frowned upon me angrily,
But Zeus, arising from his awful throne,
Smiled on me, beckoning with his dread right
hand,

Wherein the sleeping lightnings' quivering glare
Shone, terrible to look on. Next, he turned,
And taking from a Goddess near at hand
A golden chalice, held it out to me,
And spake,—deep as the thunder was his voice.—

'O Perseus, tried and proven, well-beloved,

Thou that hast fought and conquered, my dear son,
Worthy thy sire, take thou the meet reward
Of deathless deeds.—Drink and arise newborn.’

“Then, trembling, from his hand I took the cup
And drank, and lo! a darkness as of death
Fell on mine eyes, and all my senses swam :
And pangs as of intensest agony
Convulsed me, and I sank upon the ground
Like one that feels an arrow in his heart,
And then,—or so it seemed to me,—I died.

And when again I woke to consciousness,
I found myself alone in some vast realm
Of wind and stars and darkness : and the void
Grew widening out before me, and my soul
Roamed fetterless through regions of dim Space
Unfathomable : yet, vast as Space itself,
My spirit, filling all immensity,
Embracing all things in its mighty grasp,
Lost sight and touch of individual Self,
Bodily limitation, separate sense
Of earthly life and finite entity :
Yet was its sentience neither merged nor lost,

For thought was there, and life, and strenuous will,
Whose bare volition seemed identical
With uttermost fulfilment. Mind and sense
Were portions of some vast Omnipotence,
Whose might upheld the visible Universe :
Yet nowise was the sense of Being lost,
But rather quickened ; for the narrow bonds
That compass round Man's soul on every side,
Fell off from me, and my expanded life
Diffused itself through all things,—moon and sun,
Earth, planets, stars, and forms of beasts and herbs,
Dull senseless stones, and seas, and wastes of air,—
And, where it penetrated, vivified,
Transformed and quickened all things : and I lived
In all things, and was all things.—Then I woke.”

He ceased : and Arethusa, answering, said :
“Thy second dream is dark and difficult :
That leave I unto Ægle, who is wise
Beyond my other sister and myself
In visions, and especially in this ;
For she is priestess unto Mother Ge,
Who of her kindness to the race of men

Vouchsafed it to thee. Yet this much I know,
Full is it of deep import, ominous,
And helpful to thee, first and most of all :
For that which now thou hast not, yet must
have

Before thou slay Medusa, lies therein
Concealed in crabbéd mask of parable,
Even as the almond in its outer husk
Of pitted fibrous shell : yet fear thou not
To miss the hidden clue, whose slender thread
Unlocks the windings of its labyrinth,
For even as I speak with thee, I note
The dawn of meaning in my sister's eyes,
And that which she shall speak is utter truth,
And thy salvation. For thy other dreams,
These need no seer to interpret them :
For surely, inasmuch as thou didst see
The phantom image of thyself, that took
The Gorgon's head from out thy goat-skin bag,
And set it in the centre of this shield,
Whereto it clave, as it were part thereof,
So is it palpable beyond all doubt
That she may yet be slain by mortal man

Such as thou art,—although we knew it not
Until this hour.

As for the fiery draught
Thou drankest from the hand of Father Zeus,
What is it but the nectar of the Gods,—
The cup of immortality, whereby
The perishable dross of mortal flesh
Is purified from those gross elements
Wherein the seeds of death and of decay
Lie, thickly sown, ready to germinate
In every single atom whence the clay
Of that complex corporeal tenement
Wherein is housed the vital principle
Of being, is compounded and compact?
Which being once accomplished, there remains
Only such finer matter as the soul
Can fashion, fuse, and interpenetrate
With subtlest spark of immaterial light,
Recuperative, inexhaustible,
And death-defying :—yea, and furthermore,
Can mould to whatsoever form or shape
Is aptest semblance of the passing mood
That sways its essence : for the frame becomes

The tangible expression of the soul
That animates it, in whose life it lives,—
Its outer raiment, not its prison-house,—
Ethereal, plastic, changeable at will,
Diffusible by emanative force
Throughout all worlds and everything therein,
Or colligible by absorptive power
To one small focus of intensest life :
Even as rays of sunlight, permeating
The mass of certain crystals, are dispersed,
Or gathered to a point that kindleth
Dry wood, or charcoal,—and by other ones
Disintegrated into separate hues
Bright as the colours of the cloudy bow.
Nor otherwise than thus, in this thy dream,
When thou didst put on immortality
Did every sensual chain that binds thy soul
In bands of clay, fall off, and leave thee free
To wander through the Universe at will,
Informing with thy energizing might
All forms of matter, yea, and Space itself,
Till each or all became as uttered words
Whose core of inner meaning was thyself."

“Surely, O Arethusa,” Perseus cried,
“These auguries are good beyond all hope !
For hardly can it be that I shall fail,
Or vainly strive with adverse destiny,
Now that great Zeus hath set his sign and seal
Of high approval on mine enterprise.
Yet what, O Ægle, of my second dream ?”

Then Ægle, speaking like a Pythoness
Drunk with strong inspiration, made reply :

“In the beginning, ere the earth arose
Flower-like, from the stony breast of Night,
The Darkness was, and through all Time and Space
Is always, and shall be for evermore,
Eternally unchanging : from beneath,
Above, and round about, on every side,
It compasseth the daylight life of Man :
Yea, all the brightness of a myriad stars
Is but as dust, or thinly scattered seed,
That bears a little fruit of golden light,
The germ whereof lies rooted in the Dark,
As doth the wintry snowdrop’s silvery bulb
Within the sterile bosom of the ground

Unwarmed by kisses of the amorous sun.
Yet even as Earth's dead and sluggish soil,
Despite its frozen slumber, stirs and wakes
The soul of this pale harbinger of spring,
So doth the Darkness quicken into life
The Light that lurks within its caverned gloom,
Its child, its offspring, and its opposite.

“Day out of Night, and Night because of Day!
Light out of Darkness bursting joyously,
And Darkness, like a pall, drawn heavily
Over the mournful face of dying Light!—
Who shall declare the secrets of the Dark,
Or plumb the ocean of the Universe?

“Wisdom is Light: yet Wisdom's hidden roots
Delve down into the Darkness.—Life is Light:
Yet Life's still seed lies buried deep in Death:
Out of the Darkness, for a moment's space,
Its radiance leaps like lightning through the night;
One moment more, and Darkness swallows it.

“Even as a child, astray in pathless woods,

That, lighting on a little sunny lawn,
Deems itself safe at home, and, lingering there,
Plays on till nightfall, heedless and secure,
Then plunges once again into the maze,
And, wandering helplessly, is lost once more,
Even so is Man, that, with belated step
Strays blindly 'twixt the Darkness and the Dark.

“Therefore in Darkness lies the pregnant germ
Of Light that dreams till dawning. Opposite
Are these, yet necessary each to each :
For if the one were not, the other too
Must cease to be. The twain are contrary,
But yet not adverse.—Therefore if the light
Fail thee, whereby to guide thine erring feet,
Seek counsel of the very Dark itself
Until thou find it. Darkness absolute
Is none, nor Light, for both are relative :
And where one is, the other also is,—
Yea near at hand. Thus from the blackest void
Shalt thou behold Light rise regenerate.

“Also in Light the seed of Darkness lies,

For Light is active, Darkness negative,
And Action ever tends to waste itself,—
By gradual exhaustion, modified
Into potential forms of Energy.
For active forces are controlled and checked
By other forces contrary thereto,
Whose action and reaction neutralize
By slow and imperceptible degrees
The lessening impulse of the primary.
Thus Force, when once as Light made manifest,
Is tending towards exhaustion,—and when quenched
Is not abolished, no nor yet impaired,
Or in amount, or in intensity,
For, slumbering on the bosom of the Dark,
It rests, and gathers to a point again,
Is no more dissipated, but becomes
Dormant, not dead, ready to wake anew
In visible forms of active Energy.

“Ask of the Darkness ! Stretch your hands thereto,
Ye race of Men ! There sleeps the hidden Truth,
Whose rays shall light the slow-ascending steps
Of countless generations yet unborn !

Rifle the dim recesses of its realms,
With patient questioning : unveil, explore,
Dive down, reach upwards !—Onward still, and on,
Extend your conquering march, ye pioneers
Of Light and Knowledge !—Endless is the road,
And rough the path, yet shall it lead you on
From light to light, from truth to larger truth,
From victory to completer victory,—
From Manhood unto Godhead, O ye Men !

“ All this, and more, is shadowed in thy dream.
Yet distant is the dawn of that far day :
And, ere its sunrise, Gods shall rise and fall,
And rise and fall again a thousand times :
And Light shall follow Darkness, Darkness Light :
Yet neither shall the Light nor Darkness fail
Till Time shall cease, and all be drawn in one.

“ Fear not the Darkness !—Rest is of the Dark,
Sleep for sad eyes, cool dews for withering herbs,
Peace and refreshment for the arid soul
That droops beneath the glare of Life's fierce sun,
And, weary of the battle and the broil,

Seeks refuge from the wild world's bickering jars :—
For Darkness oft shall save what Light destroys,
Even as Light shall save what Darkness slays.

“ Thus also Darkness is the nurse of Truth,
That nourishes and fosters, yet conceals,
Until the fulness of its time be come.
—In darkness and in silence sprouts the seed,
Safe-hidden from the biting spring-time frost,
Which else had marred the splendour of its flower.

“ As for the present meaning of thy dream
Thus runs it. Of the darkness and the cloud
Is born thy safety and Medusa's doom :
Therefore in cloud and darkness must thou walk
If thou wouldst walk in safety.—In the gloom
That darkly lowers above the Shades below,
Where the last circle of the hated Styx
Surrounds the central regions of the dead,
Hard by stern Hades' awful dwelling-place,
Within a cheerless cavern, lies a hat
Which whoso wears shall walk invisible.
But never foot may cross the threshold drear

Of those dim realms of everlasting Night,
Save of the dead, and those that cannot die.
Wherefore, because thou canst not go thyself,
For thou art mortal, will I go for thee,
And beg this boon of dread Persephoné
With prayers and tears. Not easily, I trow,
Shall all my pleading bend the iron will
Of those inexorable potentates
Whose ears are deaf to sound of mortal prayer,
Or aught, except the fiat of the Fates.
Nor is the venture all unhazardous ;
For though dark Hades hath no final power
Upon the deathless life of this poor frame,
Nor any power at all upon my will,
Yet may he bar my passage to his realm,
And if I still press on and enter in
Unbidden, as most surely should I do,
Since on my mission hangs thy destiny,
He may refuse me exit.—Nay, sweet friend,
Persuade me not to pause for fear or risk :
Naught do I fear, and little do I risk :
Nor will I alter this my fixed intent
Though Zeus himself forbade mine enterprise.

For what were friendship that would hazard naught
To serve the loved one?—I would peril all,
Yea life itself, if that were possible,
To snatch thee from destruction.—Hold thy peace!
I will not listen while base Caution speaks
Even with thy lips.—Nor do I greatly fear
Denial, or the wrath of that grim King:
For Destiny, methinks, doth fight for thee,
And as she willeth so must Hades do.
Yet even granted he be wroth with me,
He can but mew me in Elysian fields,
Among the Blest. Only abide thou here,
With Arethusa and Hesperia,
Until the evening of the seventh day,
For then shall I return to them and thee,
Unscathed,—if peradventure I return.”

“O Ægle,” answered Perseus, “loth am I
That thou shouldst peril aught in this my cause:
Yet if indeed I may not go myself,
Then order all things even as thou wilt.”
Whereto she answered, “Rest thou well content,
For verily there is no other way.

And now 'tis wellnigh time for me to go,
And make me ready to depart forthwith;
And ye shall go with me a little way,
Unto a barren valley, at the base
Of yon great mountain, whence a gloomy cave
Leads to the world of Shadows and of Night.
And there shall ye three take your leave of me
Until the evening of the seventh day.
And after ye have seen me on my road
Thus far, return not homeward, but ascend
The mountain by the eastern slope thereof;
For Arethusa and Hesperia
Shall this day guide thee unto Atlas' seat
High up among the cloud-wreaths and the snow,
For thou hast need of him to counsel thee.
Huge is he, as the crag whereon he kneels
In everlasting punishment, condemned
By angry Zeus to bear the crushing load
Of Heaven's vast vault, because he dared to fight
Against the Gods, when in the Titans' war
Old Cronos vainly strove for mastery
With his rebellious children, whose revolt
Tore from his grasp the sceptre of the skies.—

Not all unrighteous was that ruined cause,
Yet terrible the retribution earned
By those who championed it,—for might is right
Even with the Gods ; and ruthless Destiny
Recks naught of those she tramples under foot.
But, though he be accurséd of the Gods,
Yet none the less is Atlas just and wise,
And gentle, loving all the race of men,
Whereto indeed he doth himself belong :
For though he be the brother of our sire,
And also of Prometheus, whose dread doom
Is even worse, if that be possible,
Yet is he mortal, though the strenuous grip
Wherewith his giant frame takes hold on life
Almost defies the weak assaults of Time,
And, slackening imperceptibly with age,
After a lifetime of five thousand years
Still holds his chafing and reluctant soul
Unwillingly confined in bonds of flesh,
Which gladly would he doff and cease to be :
For calmly, yet with desperate desire,
He waits for Death to ease him of his toil,
Longs for him, calling on him night and day,

Wearying his deaf and inattentive ears
With prayers for that grim boon which all men else
Shun most of all, but which the envious Gods
Deny to those that seek it, hoarding it
For those that fear it. Patient and serene
He evermore expects the tardy hour
Whose dawning shall release him from his toil :
For seldom doth he murmur or complain,
But always when we seek his snow-clad home
Greets us with careless smiles and merriment,
As though his grievous penance were a jest.
Yet well we know his soul is set on death,
And greatly though we love and honour him,—
Yea equally with Hesperus our sire,—
Though by his loss ourselves were clean bereft
Of love, and friendship, and companionship,
And all that renders life endurable
In this lone isle of desolate loveliness,
Yet still, so hard and grievous is his lot,
That scarcely would we hold him bound in life
Could he but find that death he coveteth.—
To him, then, shalt thou straight betake thyself,
And he shall tell thee whither thou must wend

To seek the Gorgon,—for his sight is keen
As that of lynx or pard, and from his peak
He looks abroad upon all lands and seas,
And little is there that escapeth him
Of aught that chanceth underneath the sun.—
But these things shall my sisters tell to thee
The while ye journey thitherwards. Arise,
And let us hasten our departure hence :
Already are the horses of the dawn
Above the sea, and thou hast far to go
Ere nightfall : for on yon bleak mountain-top
Thou canst not tarry after set of sun,
For bitter is the night-wind and the frost,
And none save Atlas may abide the cold."

BOOK IV.

HOW ATLAS TOOK AN OATH OF PERSEUS.

SHE ceased : and from the chamber passed the
three :

And Perseus, leaping from his couch, arose,
Gave thanks to Pallas, Ge, and Father Zeus,
The while he donned his arms,—then issuing forth
Washed and anointed, vigorous as a God,
Passed onward to the hall of tapestry,
Where Arethusa brought him food and wine.
But, almost ere his brief repast was done,
Came Ægle, saying : “ All is now prepared :
'Tis time we were already on our road.
Take thou this skin of wine as offering
To Atlas : lo, I bear these fruits and flowers,
A fitting gift to great Demeter's child ;

For though the grisly monarch loves not such,
Oft doth Persephoné bethink herself
Of Enna, and the fruitful vales of earth,
And these shall win me favour in her eyes."

Then quickly passing through the brazen gates
They stood beneath the laughing skies of morn,
And onward through the garden bent their steps,
By pleasant lawns, fair orchards, mellowing fruits,
Delicate palms, rich flowers of tropic growth,
And cool delicious arbours, crystal streams,
Tall graceful cedars, groves of olive-trees,
And hoary oaks and beeches, overgrown
With ivy and the interwoven stems
Of scandent creepers,—dark-blue clematis,
And scarlet passion-flower, sweet honeysuckle,
And trailing roses gay with scented blooms
Of every hue, from purest pearly white
To deepest crimson, dark as Tyrian dyes,—
Strange wealth of gorgeous orchids, wonderful
With curious blossoms, man- and monkey-faced,
And some like bees, and birds, and butterflies,
Heavy with languorous odours such as woo

The drowsy sense to unaccustomed dreams
Of sleep on slumberous summer afternoons,
In magic bowers, to low voluptuous strains
Of trembling lutes, warm winds, and rustling leaves,
And murmurous songs of girls and nightingales,
Soft hum of insects, splash of bubbling streams,
Warmth, colour, sweetness, music and delight,
And over all the hovering wings of Love.

A faery pleasance, hedged with myrtle-brakes,
And perfumed thickets of white flowering thorn,
That bloomed the whole year long beneath the
 breath
Of winds unawakened by the tempest's roar,
And summer skies that never ceased to smile,—
It seemed the very haunt of innocent joy,
Long restful peace and utmost solitude.

Wilder perchance, yet scarce less beautiful
Outside the garden, downwards to the sea,
The dreaming valleys basked beneath the sun;
And through the length and breadth of all the land,
The forests lay, bathed in the golden light;

And, underneath the boughs, the purling stream
Made answer to the voices of the birds
That warbled 'neath the sunlit dome of leaves.

And dreamlike seemed the devious woodland ways,
And dreamlike the fair faces of the Nymphs,
And dreamlike all his life since yester-eve,
To Perseus, as he walked beside the three
Through scenes of unimagined loveliness,
And felt their perfumed breath warm on his face,
And in his soul the glamour of their eyes.

Dreamlike their glances moved him: sweet yet
strange

And dreamlike fell their voices on his ear,
And dreamlike was the touch of those warm hands,
And dreamlike that dull sense of empty pain
Made mournfuller by all the natural pomp
Of cloudless skies and flowery pageantry.

Long time through sylvan glades and stately groves,
By forest lawns, and gentle rivulets,
And undulating slopes of mead and copse,

Did Perseus and the Nymphs pursue their way :
But ever as they neared the mountain's roots
Still sparser grew the verdure and the bloom ;
Insensibly the hardening landscape changed,
Cedar and oak gave place to scanty pine
And stunted larch-trees ; then the forest-land
Merged gradually with slow-ascending slope
On open upland plains, until at last
They lighted on a bleak and lonesome spot
Hard by the mountain-flank,—a barren waste
Of wild deserted moorland, treeless, bare,
Thick-bearded o'er with rushes and coarse bent,
And scanty tufts of heather : here and there
The black peat-water stood in slimy pools,
Round which thin wisps of hoary cotton-grass
Shook, palsy-stricken, in the gentle breeze,
Like dotards tottering downwards to the tomb :
And here and there a patch of watery green
Told mutely of the treacherous morass
That lurked below,—across whose quaking depths
The nimble hare chased by the hungry fox
Might hardly dare to speed her timorous flight,—
The oozy haunt of snipe, whose reedy skeap

Pipes treble to the curlew's eldritch whoop,
And the lone bittern's melancholy boom.

To westward lay the mountain; to the east
A cold grey precipice of limestone crag
Hemmed in the desolation of the dale :
And from the mountain one immense ravine,
Cleft in the solid mass as by the stroke
Of some Titanic weapon, downward yawned
Precipitously to the vale beneath,
Whereon its jaws, rugged and boulder-strewn,
Gaped, half-way up the sombre stretch of heath
To northward : at the entrance of the gorge
A solitary clump of blasted pines
Crept thinly-straggling outwards to the plain,
Like phantoms stealing from some place of tombs
In desert cities waste and ruinous.

Into the gorge they turned, and—stumbling on
'Twixt frowning walls of overhanging cliff,
Among loose stones, and prostrate trunks of trees,—
Came suddenly upon a murky cave
That lay behind a shoulder of the rift,

Whose dreary archway, vast and tenebrous,
Shaped in the solid surface of the crag,
Seemed hewn by giant hands :—a sullen pool
Of inky water slept beneath its span,
Between whose margin and the cavern's side
A pathway almost level with the brink,
Skirting its verge, gave access to the dark
That lay beyond : a cold and cheerless gloom
Hung over it as hangs a rainy mist
Low down upon the surface of a tarn
Among the hills, far in the sunless North.

Here paused the three : and from her flowing robe
The eldest Nymph drew forth a little lamp,
And kindled it with flintstone and dry wood ;
Then hastily she kissed the other twain,
Embracing them,—and Perseus too she kissed,
Holding his hand close-clasped in both her own,
The while she bent her mild and steadfast eyes
Full on his anxious face, and sighed "Farewell !
O child of Zeus !" —then, turning suddenly,
Caught up her lamp and fled into the cave,
Swiftly as some bright dream of vanished youth

Too fair for earth, when from the dreamer's gaze
It dies upon the dark before the dawn.

Long time they watched the glimmering lamplight
fade,

Then vanish in the all-devouring dark,
Sadly as mourners watch the fluttering breath
On dying lips unutterably dear,
That, hovering round its mortal tenement,
Down the long hopeless stretch of afternoon,
Parts with the parting of the dark and light,
And on the cold grey bosom of the eve
Flees far beyond all sight of loving eyes
Or sound of loving voices,—out of reach
Of loving hands, that, on the empty air
Vainly outstretched for many a weary year,
In daytime trance or visions of the night
Clutch at the void, and clasp with wild embrace
Pale dreams and phantoms, searching piteously
Dim wildernesses of the night and day
For that which was, and is not any more,
Nor shall be, though the fainting spirit fail
With thirst of fruitless longing unassuaged,

And hopeless hope, whose sharp corroding fang
Gnaws with the ravenous hunger of despair.

Long after the last transitory gleam
Of fitful light sank flickering into gloom
They lingered, staring blankly at the dark,
Unbroken now by any faintest ray ;
Then, shuddering, turned, and hurrying back again
Fled hastily from that ill-omened cave,
Down the rough passage of the rift, nor paused
Until once more they reached the open plain
Outside the straggling clump of blasted pines,
Where, overcome with sorrow and affright,
The trembling Nymphs sank weeping on the ground.
And Perseus knew not how to comfort them,
For heavy was the cloud upon his soul,
And Care sat throned upon his furrowed brow,
So that his troubled looks belied his words,
And, gazing on his face, they wept the more.

At last, he sat him down beside the twain,
Deep-sunk in gloomy thought ; and vacantly
Looked out afar into the cloudless sky,
And saw three eagles, winging from the East,

That neared and neared, till, presently, they lit
Upon a fallen pine-trunk close at hand,
Whereon they sat together, side by side,
As Perseus and the Nymphs sat side by side,
Motionless, gazing on them steadily :
And Perseus watched them idly for a while,
And idly spake he to Hesperia
Who sat beside him weeping, " Lo those birds,
How quietly they sit there watching us : "
Whereat she raised her head ; but when her eyes
Fell on the birds, upstarting to her feet,
She laughed aloud : whereat her sister looked
And laughed in turn, and straightway dried her
tears,
Then turned to Perseus joyfully, and said :
" O Perseus, lay all doubt and fear aside,
For now we know that *Ægle* shall return,
And all things shall be well with us and thee :
For lo, these messengers of Father Zeus !—
Not one, but three,—an omen, favourable,
Beyond all hope,—an earnest of success
Indubitable, to us whose hidden lore
Can read these secret tokens of the Gods

Surely as thou wouldst read an open scroll.
Arise thou therefore with a cheerful heart,
And let us quickly seek old Atlas' crag :—
Already is the morning somewhat spent,
And little time is left us for delay."

Then Perseus rose : and even as he rose,
The eagles, with a loud triumphant scream,
Rose also, wheeling thrice above his head,
And, soaring towards the cloud-capt mountain-top,
Slow-lessening in the distance, disappeared
Among the misty wreaths that veiled the peak.
And Arethusa cried, "Thou seest them
Whither they go : their flight is ominous :
Now know I that this road wherein we walk
Shall lead thee unto that which thou dost seek,
Wherefore make haste and let us follow them."

Forthwith they set their steps upon a track
Ascending upwards from the mountain-spur ;
Nimbly as deer they scaled the difficult steep,
And, ere the sun had reached his zenith, stood
Close underneath the level of the clouds

That hung about the summit : bleak and lone
And naked was that wind-swept eminence,
Treeless and herbless : far below them lay
The dense pine-forests and deep-rifted chasms,
And mighty shoulders buttressing the sides
Of the huge central cone whereon they stood,
Imminent, poised between the earth and heaven,
As on some ladder reared against the walls
Of high Olympus' towering citadel :
And further off, beyond the mountain's base,
Drowned deep in golden sunlight, hill and vale
In one vast panorama widely spread,
Glowed lustrous green, like some great emerald
Set in the sapphire circle of the deep.

Yet hardly did they check their swift ascent
To gaze upon the wondrous opulence
Of that unrivalled spectacle, but plunged
Into the mist, and ever upward toiled,
Like mountain roes, leaping from rock to rock
With tireless limbs : immortal strength and youth,
That knows not of fatigue or weariness,
Impelled the lithe limbs of the delicate Nymphs ;

And hardly did the unveiled loveliness
Of their soft ivory bosoms rise and fall
With more than wonted quickness, though their speed
Had distanced far the hardest mountaineer,
Trained in Arcadian wilds to hunt the stag
With flying feet scarce tardier than his own :
And even Perseus, swift among the swift,
Supple and lean and sinewy as a pard,
Inured to travel, hardship, and fatigue
From earliest boyhood, had been left behind
But for the wingéd sandals, wherewithal
He flew beside the Nymphs lightly as they,
Skimming the surface of the steep ascent,
Close as a swallow, on dull August eves
Hawking for flies above the pasture-land,
When gathering clouds foretell impending showers.
Thus swiftly hurrying upwards through the mist,
They passed the boundary of perpetual frost,
And over slippery ice and frozen snow
Pressed onwards till they reached a precipice
On whose sheer face was hewn a narrow stair
Two cubits broad, that slanted from beneath
Athwart its breadth, up to the topmost peak ;

Where, on a little snowy table-land,
The giant knelt, with mighty shoulders bowed
Beneath a ponderous pedestal, whose base
Seemed rooted on his back : a shaft of bronze
Immeasurably massive, broad, and high,
Was set thereon, whose vast columnar length
Shot towering to the skies :—its capital,
Whereon reposed the whole stupendous mass
Of all the solid globe of heaven, lay hid
Far up within the dark-blue dome above.

Soon as they reached the summit of the stair,
The giant gazed on Perseus curiously,
And with a humorous twinkle in his eyes
Called out to Arethusa jestingly,—
“ Since when hath Ægle donned Athené’s gear,
And grown a cubit taller and a beard ?
A pretty sight forsooth for girls like ye
To copy Pallas and turn fighting men !
If such be your amusements there below,
By Cronos, but I’ll put the heavens down
And come and school ye !—’Twere a merry jest
To crack Olympus’ floor, and topple Zeus

And all the nest of hornets, bodily
Head-foremost in the sea, or, better still,
On some fine cliff, conveniently hard,
In Asia say, or on the Lemnian coast,
Where all might comfortably crack their ribs
Together, and turn tumblers socially :
After which happy little accident
I rather fancy one or two of them
Might learn the elements of sympathy,
And cease to poke their amiable fun
At that unlucky blacksmith-god, whom Zeus
Pitched out a while ago, for hauling up
The scolding jade, his mother, whom her spouse
In pure affection had hung out to cool
Head downwards from the battlements. Ha ! ha !
'Twould make me young again to see the fun !
There'd be a pretty buzzing in the hive !
And all because a pack of silly girls
Grow beards and turn to ugly Amazons,—
Or Zeus himself knows what,—though in my day
We Titans should have called that thing a man,
Well-grown and handsome, though diminutive.
—What, blushing ?—Oh you sly young pussy-cats !

Why who'd have thought it of you? Ho! ho! ho!
And so you've got a pretty playfellow
Down there among the apple-blossoms!—Well,
The crime is not so deadly after all.—
Bless them, they're all alike, the pretty dears!
Nymph-nature, woman-nature, just the same
The whole world over, east and west alike.
—Yes, I'll forgive you, if you're penitent:—
Come Arethusa and Hesperia
And kiss your uncle.—As for t'other one,
No thanks!—I'd liever buss Athené's self:—
By Cronos! how the cat would scratch and spit!”

And Perseus answered, laughing heartily:
“Thou sayest well, O Titan, verily!
This face and figure were a poor exchange
For Ægle's, and Athené's livery
A sorry barter for that graceful gear
Wherein she went but now to Hades' court
To ask a boon for me.—No Amazon
Am I, although Athené's messenger,
Nor aught, except a man of thine own mould,—
Or rather, not of thine,—for Father Zeus

Doth make them somewhat smaller nowadays,
Much as men put good wine in little skins.
Which mindeth me I have one here for thee
By no means little, as my shoulders know,
That haled it up this mountain for thy cheer.”
“Ho ! ho !” laughed Atlas, “little men, I see,
Can give and take a jest, like bigger ones.
Thou art a proper fellow, as I judge,
Although thou be’est Athené’s messenger,—
The kill-joy tiger-cat !—I saw her once,
And sour enough she looked, by Cronos’ beard,
To curdle all the goats’-milk in the world !—
A fig for Goddesses that play the prude
Because no lover thinks them worth his pains !
—There’s Aphrodité, now,—I mind me well
When first she rose out of the churning waves,
White as the foam-flowers round about her shell,
A lovely creature, gentle, warm, and kind,—
Fair as the morn—

Ah, that was long ago !

In those old days when Gods were merciful,
And laws were just, and earth was beautiful,
And men content and happy,—not as now

Crushed down and broken by the envious Gods,
Whose one delight is wanton cruelty !
Oh ! for one single year, one day, one hour,
Of kindly Cronos' golden-sceptred rule,
When life was not perpetual misery,
And Gods were friends to mortals !—All is changed ;—
Changed for the worse. The Gods are foes to men ;
And men bow down before their evil might,
And do them slavish homage.—Let it pass.—
Reach hither that same skin of wine, I pray,
Good youth, and let us drink. The times are ill :
And there are hours when even I wax sad,
Although I was a merry fellow once,—
As hearty as the heartiest.—Fill thy cup,
And drink with me the poor old Giant-God,
Mortal as thou, who loved the race of men,
Pitied their woes, and strove to succour them,
While any power was his.

Alas ! alas !—

Witness ye Gods against me, if ye may,—
Was I not just, and mild, and placable ?
Was I not all that ye can never be,
Because your souls are evil ?—Me and mine

Ye have cast out, dethroned, tortured and slain,
These thousand years.—Bear witness, if ye can,
Did any of us do evil wittingly ?

Ye answer not. Ye cannot answer me,
For thus it was : I speak the naked truth !—
If therefore we were, as ye are not, kind,
Honest, and simple-minded, equitable,
Lovers of justice, righters of the wrong,
Rulers that ruled by gentleness, not fear,—
Not followers of our unrestrained caprice,
Slaves to our own ungovernable desires,
Even as ye, and all the sort of ye,—
Then wherefore should we be made desolate ?
Is Ill omnipotent ? Is Right a dream ?
Is Justice fable, and is Truth a lie ?—
Answer me, ye that rule the fates of Gods,
Ye dark inexorable Destinies !
Shall there be no redress for human ills,
No cure for our intolerable wrongs ?
Shall not these Gods whose ruthless despotism
Grinds Earth to dust beneath its iron heel,—
Shall not these change and pass, even as we ?
How long, ye Powers inscrutable, how long

Shall wrong and violence bear rule?—Away!
Naught heeds or hearkens when I call. The deep
Is blind and dumb, and cannot answer me.
There is no help or comfort anywhere.
What boots it to complain?—

The wine! the wine!

—I said there was no comfort anywhere;—
But lo! there is a little comfort here.
Ha! Dionysus, thou art not the worst
Of a bad brood! Thy vintage dulls the pang
Of poisonous pain, if only for an hour.
Small pleasure is there left to me in life,
And yet I love a draught of generous wine
That sparkles clear as Aphrodité's eyes.
—A little,—not too much. I ever loathed
Beastly intoxication, and all vice
That pampers the fierce brute within the breast
Until he grow too strong for Reason's curb.
Yet hath the grape her uses.—Thanks, fair youth,
Thou hast brought rare good stuff.—I drink to thee."

So saying, Atlas with a finger's touch
Brake the thick-crustèd ice that stayed the flow

Of water from a little crystal spring
Hard by, within the circle of his reach,
And from its wave half-filled a brazen cup
That lay beside him ready to his hand,—
A ponderous goblet nigh two cubits deep,
Whose polished sides were cunningly embossed
With well-wrought figures of the elder Gods,
Old Cronos throned aloft in sceptred might,
Bright Hyperion charioting the morn,
Fair Aphrodité's naked loveliness
Flower-like arisen from the salt sea-foam,
And many another half-forgotten scene
Of old-world history. Then daintily
The giant mingled in the ruby must,
The while he stirred it with a hollow reed,
And set it to his lips and slowly drank
A mighty draught that drained the vessel dry,
And, smiling, smacked his lips approvingly,
Tinkled the cup and set it upside down
Beside him on the ground. Then Perseus said :
"Right glad am I the wine mislikes thee not,
O noble Titan : for thy doom is hard,
And little hast thou done to merit it.

Full well I know that thou wast kind and just,
Lover of men, not stronger in thy strength
Than in thy mildness and benignity :
And thus indeed do all men speak of thee,
Even to this hour, despite all time and change,
Though ever rather as of one who was
In days gone by, than as of living man.
Oft have I heard of thee, yet little dreamed
That I should ever see thee face to face,
Or stand in need of help from thee, as now."

Then Atlas cried : " What help is there in me ?
Small store of aid have I for any man,
Who am myself most wretched of them all :
Yet of that little will I freely give ;
Say, what can Atlas do to pleasure thee ? "

" O Titan," answered Perseus, " verily
I would thy power were equal to thy will,
Then were the race of men the happier.
Yet what I ask is well within thy power,
For thou art wise, and knowest many things.
I do but crave a knowledge of the road

To that far country where the Gorgons dwell."

"What wouldst thou with the hags?" the Titan
roared,

"Full quickly will they make an end of thee;
And loth were I to help thee to thy death,
For, of a truth, I like thee well enough.
Think better of it. Let the witches be;
And bide thou here among the apple-trees,
And thou shalt wed whichever likes thee best
Of my three nieces. 'Tis a merry life
For all save poor old Atlas. Thou shalt come
Sometimes, and drink a cup of wine with me,
And I will tell thee tales of bygone days,
And teach thee wondrous secrets of the stars,
And of the earth, and of the Shades below,
The which shall make thee wise and powerful
Above all men that live upon the earth,
Yea, equal almost with the Gods themselves :—
How likest thou my offer?—Wilt thou stay?"

But Perseus answered : " I have sworn an oath
To slay Medusa ; and as I have sworn

So must I do, at whatsoever cost,—
Yea, though I now refuse the fairest fate
My mind could picture in its brightest dream.”

And Atlas, smiling, answered : “ It is well ;
An honest fellow art thou, and a true,
No breaker of thy word. If thou hast sworn,
Then must thou keep thy faith : for verily
I hold or men or Gods of small account
Who blench one hair’s-breadth from their plighted
word.

And therefore am I here. My oath was pledged
To Cronos, ages ere the birth of Zeus :
And though, when prisoner in the Titans’ war,
He proffered me rewards and liberty
If I would swear allegiance to himself,
Yet would I none of him, but kept my troth
Unbroken, and will keep it to the end.

“ As for these Gorgons : well I know their lair :
Yet, ere I tell thee, thou must swear to me
That thou wilt truly grant me one request,
Which presently I shall unfold to thee.

Fear not to swear.—Thou hast my sacred word,
A Titan's solemn pledge, inviolable,
That that which I shall ask involves no wrong
Or injury to any human soul,
—Naught inconsistent with thy former oath,
Nor aught that shall embroil thee with the Gods ;
Nay rather shalt thou earn their gratitude,
And be in favour with them for the deed
Which I shall bid thee do.—Wilt swear to me?—
For if thou swearest not, I hold my peace.”

And Perseus said, “I love not blindfold oaths :
Already have I been ensnared thereby,
By one who sought my ruin : yet I know
That thou art righteous, just, and honourable,
And he a villain. Therefore will I swear
To do whatever thou shalt ask of me,
Within the limits thou thyself hast named,
If it be possible for man to do.”

“Thou swearest,” said the giant : “it is well !
Yet, ere I tell thee that which I require,
Fain would I put one question unto thee

For thine arbitrament. What thinkest thou?—
If one be sunk in utter wretchedness,
Hopeless, despairing, irremediable,
Not to be cured or ended save by death,—
If life, which should be joy and happiness,
Be hourly torment, hourly misery,—
If all his frame be racked with instant pain,
And all his soul be clouded with despair,
So that he ever cries aloud for death,
As other men for life,—if he be slave
To his worst enemy, whose cruelty
Is unrelenting, devilish, exquisite,
And if this enemy have found a means
Of poisoning life with long-drawn agony,
Subtle as stabs from some envenomed spear,
Beneath whose goad his hapless victim writhes
Without one chance or shadow of redress,—
What thinkest thou, O youth,—should such an
one,
If by some strange unlooked-for accident
He find deliverance ready to his hand,—
Should he, I say, embrace the boon, or no?
Judge thou, and as thou judgest answer me.”

And Perseus answered : " Of a surety, yea :
There is no power on earth should hold me bound
In such fell fetters. I would find a means
Sooner or later to escape therefrom :
Or, if no other way were possible,
Then would I slay my tyrant, or myself."

Then Atlas : " Thou hast spoken like a man,
Nor otherwise than as I deemed of thee.
Now hearken while I whisper in thine ear,
For I would spare my nieces, whom I love,
All needless sorrow for old Atlas' sake,
Until the end be come.

Behold the man

I told thee of but now,—for I am he,
Atlas the Titan ! That same case is mine,
And death the one deliverance possible.
Therefore I charge thee by thy sacred oath,
When thou returnest with Medusa's head,
That whensoever I shall ask of thee
Thou straightway fetch it hither to my crag,
And hold it up aloft before mine eyes
Unveiled, that I may look upon its face :

For by this only means may Atlas die
Yet still support this column, by whose fall
The whole expanse of heaven from east to west
Would crack and rend asunder, toppling down
With hideous crash upon the ruined earth,
Whereby mankind would perish utterly :
Which dread extermination I account
Too dear a ransom for mine own release :
For ever have I loved the race of men ;
Wherefore did Zeus devise this punishment,
Else had he doomed me to some other woe.

“ Such is the service I demand of thee :
And even as thou doest unto me,
So be it done to thee.—If thou keep faith,
May Gods and men alike keep faith with thee ;
And may my blessing rest upon thy head,
And thou be free and guiltless of my death ;
May happiness attend thee, and success,
All good be thine, all ill be far from thee
For ever. But if thou deceivest me,
May Gods and men betray thee in thy need ;
May nothing ever prosper in thine hands ;

Long mayst thou live, dishonoured and despised,
Until thou learn to seek for death in vain,
Even as he whom thou didst fool and cheat ;
And may thine end be shameful and accurst,
And the Erinnues dog thee to thy doom."

"O Titan," answered Perseus, "be it so!
For death alone, and for no other cause,
Will Perseus bate one tittle of his trust,
And if he come not, thou shalt surely know
That he hath paid the forfeit with his life.
Right sorry am I that this dismal boon
Is all that now remains for thee to crave,
Of all things else. Yet were my destiny
As thine, I had not chosen otherwise."

Then Atlas, whispering still in Perseus' ear,—
"Thou sayest sooth : there is no other choice,
For I am weary of this punishment,
Nor have I any refuge save in death,
Nor any chance of death save only this :—
Yet is thy venture strangely perilous,
And if thou perishest the chance is lost,

And that were double pity. Hearken, friend,
And let thy wisdom weigh old Atlas' words :—
I warrant me that thou wouldst play the man
In open field against an open foe :
Yet bravery alone sufficeth not
Against these hags, whom but to look upon
Is present death : and therefore let thy head
Aid well thine hand : be brave yet cautious too,
For prudence oft-times levels desperate odds
When wedded with bright valour. Bide thy time
Patiently till thou catch the witch asleep,
Then smite, and take her head, and tarry not,
For be thou sure her sisters will give chase,
And if they overtake thee ere thy flight
Shall bring thee once more safely back again
Within the circle of this charmed isle,
Three leagues to seaward,—o'er whose boundary
May nothing foul or impious dare to pass,
Athené's self could not deliver thee.
Yet if those wingéd sandals be the same
That I have seen aforetime on the feet
Of Hermes, the swift messenger of Zeus,
They yet shall task the Gorgons' utmost speed,

For as their wearer's thought is, so their flight,
Slow as the passage of a summer breeze,
Or swifter than the raging hurricane :
And though these hags, Stheino and Euryte,
Outspeed the rapid falcon's dazzling swoop,
I doubt not thou shalt prove a match for them."
Then Perseus, "These did Hermes lend to me."
Whereto the giant answered, "It is well ;
Be strong, be vigilant, and heed my words,
For verily thou hast a golden chance,
If that be Hermes' sword upon thy thigh,
For with none other may this witch be slain."—
Whereat he bowed his head assentingly,
And Atlas, smiling, answered, "It is well ;
Listen, and I will tell thee all I know
Of these same Gorgons, and their dwelling-place.

"A hundred leagues to westward of this isle
There lies another island, at the mouth
Of a dull river, whose Lethean flood
Flows from the heart of the Unshapen Land
Toward the Streams of Ocean, and the bounds
That compass round the habitable world,—

And thither must thou first betake thyself :
Then when thou comest to this doleful spot
Follow the river upward to its source,
And it shall lead thee to a dismal plain,
About whose centre a high table-land,
Bounded by perpendicular crags, uprears
Its barrenness against the sullen sky ;
Whereon is but one solitary hill,
And in the side thereof a darksome cave,—
Which I discern the while I speak with thee,—
And in this cave the Gorgons have their lair.
And oftentimes they sleep the whole day long
Upon the hillside by the cavern's mouth,
Wallowing like swine upon the oozy ground
Lazily, now together, now apart.
Then mayst thou steal upon them unawares,
And smite Medusa while her sisters sleep.
Yet think not to escape without pursuit,
For they will scent thee though they cannot see.
Flee for thy life and get what start thou canst,
Before they wake. Be wary and discreet,
Not headstrong or foolhardy : for thy chance
Is slender if they once discover thee,

Ere all be ended, and Medusa slain.

“Now have I told thee everything.—Arise,
For lo! the waning sun is westering fast,
And yon descent is steep and difficult,—
Therefore prepare ye to depart forthwith.
—Adieu, my children.—Fare thee well, brave youth
Be wise, be prudent, and be valiant,
And thou shalt surely prosper.—Fare ye well!”

BOOK V.

HOW ÆGLE WENT TO THE SHADES.

So quickly did the three descend the steep
That, ere the earliest rising of the moon,
They stood within a valley to the south,
Close-nestling in the mountain's rugged flank,
And homeward wandered through the darkening
 woods,
Until, at length, they reached the palace gates
Beneath the starry silence of the eve.
Awhile within the hall of tapestry
They sat and spent the slow delightful hours
In feast, and song, and converse, till the moon,
Slow-mounting up the pathway of the stars,
Drew dreamily towards her utmost height.
And Perseus slept within the hall of Ge,
Yet saw no visions. With the morrow morn

They showed him all that wondrous garden-land,
Fountains and orchards, lawns and fragrant bowers,
The golden apples, and the guardian snake,
Now mild, and tame, and gentle as a hound.
And up and down they rambled all the day,
Like butterflies that flit from flower to flower,
Rich in the simple joyousness of life,
That recks not of the future or the past,
Nor heeds for shadowy fears or memories,
Whose threatening clouds so seldom cease to lower
Above Man's anxious and foreboding soul,
That dares not own the passing sunshine sweet
Because the day draws down to afternoon,
And fears to pluck the blossom of the hour
Ere yet it closes, and the hour is fled.

Were life without a trouble or a care,
Man's thought a mirror of the Universe,
Calm as the crystal surface of a lake,
Clear, unpolluted by the filth of ill,
Unchoked by weeds of wrong and poisonous deeds,
Unvexed by storms, unruffled by the winds
Of sad remembrance, or the leaden showers

Of timorous apprehension, anxious care,
Dull sorrow, loss, and pain of perished hopes,
Then Man were truly God-like.—Quietude
Is mother of high thought, and noble song,
And great achievement : Man is likest God
When lesser self-hood merges in the calm
Of that great Self which is the soul of all.

And thus it was with Perseus and the Nymphs
Adown the happy hours of those sweet days,
In that fair isle where Man's defacing touch,
Low sordid aims and vulgar appetites,
Had never marred the high serenity
Of Nature in her most serenest mood,
So that all avenues of thought and sense
Lay open to the whispers of her voice,
And all the soul reached upward to her light,
Embraced, infused, and interpenetrated,
By her strong soul whose being quickens all.

And Perseus' soul put forth her wings and soared
Far upwards to the starry realms of Song,
And all his mind was fired with Poesy,

And his dumb lips were opened, uttering forth
High visions softly voiced with melody,
Rare rhythmic cadence of harmonious sound,
That clothed majestic thought in loveliest garb
Of passionate verse, whose accents thrilled and
burned,

And stirred the listener's soul like trumpet-calls,—
Or, like the music of the nightingale
Among thick woods, upon late summer eves,
Awoke the sense to tenderest melancholy,
Soft as light snowfalls, when the frozen winds
Sleep silent in their ice-bound prison-house.—
And so the passion glowed within his breast,
Song-drunken as Apollo's, that he joined
His music to the voices of the Nymphs,
And sang with them beneath the sacred tree
Songs sweet as theirs, that mazed their wondering
ears

With deep prophetic insight, and the pomp
Of majesty, and the rich wine of power.

So sped the days until the seventh came ;
And with the afternoon they bent their steps

Back to the desolate vale, and sat them down
Upon the tree-trunk where the eagles sat,
Outside the gorge, hard by the blasted pines,
And waited, for as yet the sun was high,
And hardly did they deem the moment come
When Ægle should re-seek the upper air :
Yet scarcely were they seated, ere their ears
Caught the clear ripple of a merry laugh
Re-echoing from the overhanging crags
That frowned above the entrance to the rift,
Whereat they turned and quickly looked around,
First on the pass, and next about the grove,
Then on the plain, yet saw not any one :
And Perseus, leaping to his feet, arose
And searched the grove in vain, though still the sound
Flitted about among the ghostly pines,
Bodiless as the echo of a voice,
Now here, now there, as though eluding him,
Until he almost deemed himself the sport
Of some malicious elf or watersprite,
Or viewless phantom of the under-world,
Escaping from that dark unhallowed cave.
Then, wondering and perplexed, he turned again

To Arethusa and Hesperia,
Who still sat motionless upon the tree,
Apart, with room for one to sit between,
Where he was seated ere he rose to search :
And still the place was void : when, suddenly,
While yet his eyes dwelt gazing on the spot,
There Ægle sat between her sisters twain,
And laughed to see the face of blank amaze
Wherewith he greeted her, and, laughing, cried :
“ Hast thou forgotten that I went to seek,
O Perseus, that this jest hath cozened thee ?
Lo, this is Hades' hat upon my knees,
And even now it was upon my head,
And therefore did I walk invisible.”—
And Perseus ran towards her joyfully,
And took her hand, and kissed her on the cheek,
Crying, “ O Ægle, it rejoiceth me
Before all other things in all the earth,
To see thee once again beneath the sun :
For verily I was afraid for thee
When I was searching yon accurséd wood,
And wellnigh deemed thou wast some evil thing
The messenger of Hades, sent to mock

Our bootless grief: yet was my purpose firm
To go myself and beard the grisly King,
And win thee from him, or abide with thee."

Then she: "Did I not tell thee ere I went
That Destiny, methought, did fight for thee?
Now am I sure thereof, for verily,
The Shades were gracious past my utmost hope.
For when I reached the borders of the Styx,
There stood old Charon waiting with his barge,
Who took me straight aboard without demur
And set me down by Hades' capitol,
Close to the palace of Persephoné:
And as I passed within the brazen gates
That guard the central citadel of Night,
I came on Cerberus dozing lazily,
Who wagged a welcome with his serpent-tail,
And whined and fawned upon me joyfully,
As though in recognition of a friend.
And pondering on these happy auguries,
I sought the dwelling of Persephoné,
And lo! she waited for me at the door,
An awful presence, darkly beautiful

With sombre beauty, stately and serene,
Calm yet inscrutable, that touched the soul
With sense of dim remoteness like the depths
Of starry midnight spaces, bright yet lone,
Mirrored on moonless reaches of the deep
Ineffably profound. Her thoughtful brows
Were paler than the lily, and her eyes,
Deep-set and liquid, glowed with flameless fire,
Like pools of molten metal, and diffused
Beams not of light but darkness : strangely fair
Were those still features, yet their loveliness
Struck icy chill upon my startled sense,
And when she stooped and kissed me on the lips,
I shivered, for her breath was as the cold
Of naked Space, and smote me like a wind
Blown downwards from the winnowing wings of
Death,

So sharp it was and keen,—and of a truth
I deem that had I been of mortal mould
Those lovely lips had kissed my life away :
And then she smiled a faint mysterious smile,
Pale as the twilight of the Northern dawn
On trackless deserts of untrodden snow ;

Wherefore I bid thee cast all doubt aside,
For well it pleaseth us that thou art come ;
And thou shalt taste our hospitality,
And whensoever thou wilt, depart in peace.'

" So saying, she led me to a mighty hall,
Ceiled, floored, and panelled round with ebony,
Dimly illumined by three lamps of jet
That stood on three black marble pedestals,
Blinking like glow-worms in a sea of murk,—
Three light-blots splashed on the Cimmerian gloom
That seemed to lower around more sullenly,
Answering the feeble protest of the light
With affirmation of intenser shade.
And as I glanced around inquiringly,
I heard a deep voice issuing from the dark,
Like rumbling thunder on some starless night,
Awful, yet low,—and thus the accents rang :
' Ho ! Ægle, thou art welcome to the Shades
As though thou wert thy starry sire himself
Come down to lighten this our nether sky.'—
Then said Persephoné, "'Tis Hades' self :
Approach with me, and thou shalt speak with him.'

“Forthwith she led me up the gloomy hall,
Until we came upon a dais, raised
Some half-a-cubit's height above the floor,
And in the midst of it an ebon throne ;
And he that sat thereon was dark as night,
A shadowy blackness, vague and indistinct,
Yet outlined in the figure of a God,
Not sharply, but with slow decrease of shade
Mingling its mobile darkness with the dark
Of that funereal twilight, like a smoke
Hung densely on a mist-clogged atmosphere.
Large, stern, and awful was his countenance,
Yet rather had it seemed a dull grey cloud
That shifted, changing while I looked thereon,—
A passing vapour fashioned like a face
More than the visible features of a God
Corporeal, manifest in bodily shape,—
But for the eyes, that burned like ruddy flame,
Fierce as the flashing of a carbuncle,
Two lurid stars fraught with disastrous power,
Ominous, menacing, and terrible,
Despite the mildness of his present mood,
So that I turned mine own upon the ground,

Bowing my head before him reverently,
Until once more he uttered words like these :
' Right seldom do the daughters of the Light
Descend to this our Kingdom of the Dark,
Yet are we ever pleased to welcome them,
Although indeed we have been much maligned
As savage, churlish, and inhospitable,
Because perforce we keep a watchful eye
On all that seek admission to our realms ;
Which is but common prudence : yet I trust
That all my slaves have used thee courteously,
And sped thee on thy journey, as beseems
The guest of Hades and Persephoné ;
Else shall they hear thereof, and in such wise
As shall suffice to sear my next commands
Upon their souls in fiery characters.
Say, did yon surly boatman make thee wait ?
An if he did, by Styx, I swear to thee
He shall not pouch another obolus
This hundred years ! Did Cerberus growl at thee ?
If so, the brute shall rue it heartily,—
Or the Erinnues fright thee ?—nay I trow
I had them chained and kennelled yesterday,

So that may hardly be,—for verily
They are not beautiful to look upon,
Though necessary,—Here a horrid scream
Rang in mine ears, and then a storm of yells,
As if all Hell had broken loose,—that drowned
The muttering thunder-roll of Hades' voice,
So that he paused in wonder, listening,
Then roared, 'Who bade ye howl, ye filthy hags?
Lie still, or it shall be the worse for ye!
Think ye my guests love music such as this?
Peace, peace, I say, ye foul abortions, peace!
—What, howling still?—Ho, Demogorgon there!
Smite me those witches with thy serpent whip;
I scarce can hear the sound of mine own voice
For their demoniac yelling. Quiet them!
And if they lift a claw, or show their fangs,
Or dare to raise again their hellish din,
While this my guest abides in Hades' halls,
Hang them head-downwards over Phlegethon,
Sunk to the armpits in the fiery wave.
There let them try their chorus if they can,
And learn to disobey when Hades speaks.
What ho! By Styx, they snarl!—Away with them

To Phlegethon, nor loose them till this Nymph
Again re-cross the utmost coil of Styx.
Rebellious hell-hounds!—since your souls' delight
Is torture, ye shall have your fill of it,
Though in a somewhat new capacity!

Your pardon, fair young guest : my subjects here
Though serviceable, are sometimes mutinous,
And stand in need of wholesome discipline
To bend their stubborn tempers to my laws.
Yet shall they have a lesson for their pains,
For even so mild a ruler as myself
Must vindicate his own authority,
And quell revolt by timely punishment :
Though 'tis notorious among the Gods
That of my natural unfettered bent,
I lean too much to over-clemency :
Which is a weakness, though a kindly one,
Yet one for which my brethren blame me oft.

Now Zeus had flayed those howling hags alive,
And softly bedded them in thorns and briers,
By way of aiding the development
Of a new hide and a submissive mind ;
Poseidon too had seethed them for a year

In boiling brine :—I merely order them
A scourging and a taste of Phlegethon.
It were a pity to disable them :—
Besides, I find them useful : Tartarus
Were a poor place without Erinnues,
As pleasant, almost, as Elysium.
'Twere a mistake for any sovereign,
However mild and tamely merciful,
To flay and boil his executioners :
So have I hit upon a milder plan,—
A very nothing,—yet it may suffice
To teach them better manners : or, if not,
They can be flayed or boiled at any time
When I have leisure to attend to them :
For ill would it beseem a royal host
To trouble any fair and gentle guest
With such mere details of his government ;
The more so as I fear thy stay is short.
For even now I sent to fetch the hat,
And thou shalt have it by to-morrow morn,
And mayst depart at noonday, if thou wilt :
For at that hour hath Charon my commands
To be in waiting on thee with his barge,

Hard by the spot where thou didst lately land.
Yet, if there be no stern necessity
Or instant need for thy departure hence,
Fain would we ask thee to abide with us
So long as may conveniently be :
For welcome shall thy presence be to both,
To me, and also to Persephoné,
Who loveth all discourse of trees and flowers,
Sunshine and pleasant fruits of kindly Earth,
And deemeth little of our nether world,
Though she be sovereign mistress of the Dead,
Not less in majesty among the Shades
Than Hera's self in high Olympus' halls.
And she shall show thee many wondrous sights,
And we will entertain thee royally.
Say, wilt thou tarry with us for a space ?
I warrant me thou shalt repent it not.'

“ ‘Dread lord,’ I answered, ‘by the seventh day
From that whereon I started hitherwards
Needs must that I return : this is the fourth :
Therefore I pray let Charon wait for me
As thou hast purposed : for my time is short,

And urgent is the need that brought me here,
As doubtless thy foreknowledge teacheth thee,
For little is there, or in earth, or heaven,
Whereof thy wisdom wots not :—otherwise
Had I been fain to tarry for a while,
And see the wonders of these hidden realms,
Whereof the Gods themselves are ignorant.’
Whereto he answered : ‘ Be it as thou wilt :
Whether thy sojourn here be long or short,
Right welcome is thy presence unto us,
And fortunate the hour that leads thy steps
Across the threshold of our nether world.
Yet somewhat mayst thou see this very day,
If thou desirest ; for my gentle queen
Shall take thee to Elysium, where they build
A stately palace for a coming guest,
A mighty warrior of the olden time,
Who shall be held in high esteem of us,
Although we strove together formerly,
And even now remain unreconciled :
For so hath Fate decreed concerning him ;
Nor may his lot be otherwise than thus,
For he is just and righteous, though our foe,

And cometh hither of his own free will,
And not by any sentence of the Gods.—
Long hath he borne a grievous destiny,
But with his life his penance is complete,
And so, through death, shall he lay hold on life.
Come, wilt thou journey with Persephoné,
And see what doom the justice of the Gods
Reserveth for an equal adversary ?’

“Whereat I shot a quick inquiring glance
Towards Persephoné, who bowed her head
Mysteriously, as if in mute assent,
Smiling the while a strange, ineffable smile,
Of hidden import, wan yet beautiful,
Like ghostly moonbeams flickering fitfully,
In ruinous fanes, through cloistered colonnades,
Of crumbling arch and broken capital,
Then slowly answered for me : ‘Yea, my lord,
Elysium is a fair and peaceful spot,
And it were well our guest should visit it ;
Though seldom doth it chance that any one
Goes thither but he sees the hidden scroll
Of Fate unrolled beyond the present page,

And thus thou knowest well it standeth now
In that same palace thou hast spoken of :
Yet is the future writing better far
Than that which lieth open to the view,—
So far, at least, as it concerneth him
For whom they build : and therefore we will go,
And, if our guest shall so desire it,
Hold converse with the veiled and shrouded form
Of that pale spirit of an unborn hour
Which I myself beheld, but yesterday,
Haunting the threshold of its silent halls.'

"And Hades answering spake: 'The Hour is veiled,
Nor shall ye see its face, or hear its voice,
Except ye will : and yet the face is fair,
Though dark and cold : and that which it shall speak
Good, though it wear awhile the mask of ill.'

"'Yea,' said Persephoné, 'the face is fair
As Night is, or the darkness of the sea
Asleep upon a sunless winter morn :
And solemn is the voice, yet passing sweet,
A dirge that dies in songs of victory.'

And, as she spake these words, she smiled and sighed :

And Hades rose from off his ebon throne,
And when I looked again I saw him not,
Only Persephoné, to whom I cried,
'Tell me, O Queen, hath aught offended him ?'
Whereat she smiled and answered, 'Nay, not so :
For when his mood is mild and placable
He comes and goes as softly as a cloud :
And seldom have I seen him mild as now.
For since his servants told him yesterday
That thou wast journeying hitherwards, his ire
Hath slept, nor hath he punished any one,
Except indeed those same Erinnues,
At whose late sentence, dreadful though it be,
I grieve not, but rejoice exceedingly :
For of the many dark and evil things
In this our doleful kingdom of the Night,
These Furies are the foulest and the worst,
And oft-times prompt my lord to deeds of ill :
Nor is there anything in all the world
That loves them or will pity their mishap.—
I would thou couldst abide a day or two,

If only to prolong their punishment ;
Which truly I am curious to behold,
So, if it please thee, we will visit them
Upon our journey to Elysium,
And see the torturers tortured in their turn.'

"So saying, Persephoné led me to her bower,
A sumptuous chamber, lit with many lamps,
And richly dight, yet cold and comfortless,
And sad with that unconquerable gloom
That hangs, like mist, about the nether world.
And there I sat me down to rest awhile,
And made my offering to Persephoné,
A silver basket heaped with fruits and flowers,
At sight whereof her eyes grew dim with tears,
Yet little did she say, but smelt the flowers,
And ranged the fruit before her lovingly,
Counting the apples over twice or thrice :
Then, gazing on them long and lingeringly,
She took the smallest one and slowly ate,
Placing the rest upon a golden dish ;
And in a golden vase she set the flowers,
And sat her down beside me thoughtfully,

Half lost, perchance, in some deep reverie
Of earth, and summer sunshine, and soft winds
Astray on fragrant flowers and ripening fruit,
And sheaves of yellow corn :—when, noiselessly,
Between the silken hangings of the door
There glided in a melancholy Shade,
Bearing a salver heaped with meats and cakes,
And golden goblets brimmed with coal-black wine,
The which he proffered me,—when instantly,
The pale queen, starting from her listless dream,
Cried, ‘ Touch them not, I charge thee on thy life !
Nor eat thou anything within the Shades
Save that which I alone shall give to thee :
For this was my destruction, woe is me !
Else were I free from this infernal den !’
Whereat she smote the Shadow angrily,
Scattering the cups and viands on the ground,
The while she spake in tones of smothered rage :
‘ If thou or any of thy evil kin
Shall dare to offer aught to this my guest,
So long as she remaineth in the Shades,
Let him bethink him of Ascalaphus :
For, by the sacred river of the Styx,

I swear to make him partner in the doom
Of that accurséd meddler.—Get thee gone !’

“ Then, like a wisp of shattered cloud, that drives
Helpless, before a raging hurricane,
Sheer over the last limit of the world,
Into the outer void, and so is lost
Gulfed in the desolation of dead Space,
The trembling Shade precipitately fled,
Scared by the dark and threatening countenance
Of that dread Lady, and the awful glare
Of speechless menace in her sombre eyes.

“ Awhile she stood before me silently,—
Statue-like, following the retreating Shade
With ireful glance,—then took me by the hand
And led me quickly to the palace gates,
Where two huge wingéd dragons, black as night,
Stood ready harnessed to an ebon car,
Wherein we sat ourselves,—and instantly
The dragons, spreading wide their vast expanse
Of scaly plumage, with strong downward stroke
Smote on the sullen twilight, till the car

Rose lightly as a feather in a gale,
And swifter than the changes of a dream,
Sped onwards, cleaving through the sluggish air,
That shrieked and whistled shrilly in our ears,
Scattered like foam before our arrowy flight,
To close again behind us in a wake
Of seething gusts and turbulent broken waves.

Long time we held our course o'er dreary wastes
Of blackened marsh and stagnant reedy fen,
By Acheron, and past the dismal pools
Of Lethe's dull oblivion, and the plain
Where dead Cocytus' hateful waters lap
Their desolate banks, and where the inky coils
Of melancholy Styx wind serpent-wise
In slimy folds about the strangled shore,—
Till, peering through the gloom ahead, I spied,
Far down beneath us in the billowy dark,
A fiery streak,—like the recurring tail
Of some disastrous comet, blazing low
Upon the distant line where earth and sky
Blend softly into one continuous haze,—
Which, ever as we neared, grew lengthening out
Into a rolling flood of sweltering flame,

Circling a frowning fortress, hedged about
Impregvably, with walls of massive bronze.
Then said Persephoné, 'Yon dreary pile
Is Tartarus, and this river Phlegethon ;
And there, behold, upon the hither bank
Stands Demogorgon : let us pause awhile,
And gaze upon the justest punishment
That Hell hath seen since I, Persephoné,
First passed the stony threshold of the Night.'

"Then, dexterously as a charioteer,
Who, snatching perilous victory from the jaws
Of imminent defeat, directs his course
Straight for the gap 'twixt twain that lead the race,
And thundering swiftly past them, wins the crown
By one short hand's-breadth,—so Persephoné
Swooped downwards in mid air, and stayed her car
Upon a rocky ledge that overhung
Those seething billows of infernal flame,
Reining her dragons backward as they lit,
With nervous grasp upon the tightened curb,
So that they stood as if transformed to stone
Upon the very edge of that wild flood

Where one step forward were destruction.—There
We saw a wondrous and a fearful sight :
For lo ! a ponderous chain of brazen links,
Secured on either bank to two huge rocks,
Ran tightly stretched athwart the roaring waves,
Whence,—close about the middle of its span,—
Three horrid shapes, like foul and monstrous birds,
Half-human, wholly devilish and obscene,
Hung dangling downwards by the hinder claws,
And ever and anon, with frightful cries,
And hoarse imbruted howls of agony,
Tossed up their taloned hands, that gripped the air
With ineffectual clutch, and, moaning, writhed
Their ghastly heads above the floods of fire
That dripped and fell in sheets of liquid flame
From their abominable visages
And snaky locks,—as each, with sudden spasm
Of straining body and contorted limbs,
Upraised awhile her bestial countenance
With suffocating gasp and anguished scream,
Then, spent with frantic effort, sank again,
Yelling and struggling, in the fiery deep.
And Demogorgon mocked and taunted them,

Laughing and shouting, 'Ho! ye torturers,
How like ye this small sample of your wares?
By Hades, if it please ye half as well

As it doth me, then are ye truly blest!

I would I had the power to bless ye more:

Good sooth, ye should not stint for benison!

Whereat he laughed, till Tartarus' brazen walls
Rang harshly, echoing back with peal on peal
Of savage mirth,—then as they rose and shrieked,
Smote on his thigh, and clapped his hands, and
cried,

'By Styx, ye make a rarer spectacle,

Ye three black topsy-turvy harridans,

Than all the Graces naked in their bath!

I have not seen the like this many an age.

Enjoy yourselves, I pray, my dainty dears:

Old Demogorgon hath some leisure time,

And will await your pleasure. Ho! ho! ho!

"Awhile we gazed upon the loathsome sight,
Then, sick with strong repulsion, turned away,
And, once more mounting on the dragon-car,
Sped through the twilight towards Elysium."

BOOK VI.

HOW ÆGLE TALKED WITH THE HOUR.

“LONG time we flew through skies of leaden gloom,
But as we neared the fair Elysian plain
Insensibly the twilight dawned to day,
Though grey and cold at first,—like early morn
Ere Eos, blushing through the gates of Night,
Scatters her roses from the wakening East
Along the golden pathway of the sun,—
Then bright, and brighter still, with gradual growth
Of genial warmth and sunshine, till at length
We passed beneath what seemed the world-wide
span
Of some stupendous archway high as heaven ;
And lo ! we sailed through cloudless summer skies,
High vaulted with deep azure, bathed in light,

And cooled by gentle breezes from the West,
Odorous with perfume of unnumbered flowers.
And underneath us lay a lovely land,
Fairer than this our garden of the West,
A land of woods, and flowers, and crystal streams,
And gleaming lakes, like silver mirrors, strewn
Through field and forest, wheresoe'er the eye
Might most of all delight itself to gaze
On sylvan beauty, made more beautiful
By witchery of reflected lights or shades,
Or images of trees and passing clouds
Asleep on peaceful waters. Far and wide,
Continuous to the North and South and West,
With gentle undulations stretched the plain,
Like one unbroken garden : on the East
A cloud of thick impenetrable haze,—
Not leaden-hued as on the other side,
But soft and pearly as a summer mist,—
Hung, like a veil drawn downwards from the
 heavens,
Before that entrance to the world of Night
From whence we late emerged.—No blot of gloom,
Like ragged bales of gathering thunder-rack,

Pregnant with distant storm, saddening the skies
With melancholy presage, though the sun
Shines brightly still upon the hither side,
That curtain seemed : for gloom or heaviness
Was none in all the earth and all the air,
Only a sweet unbroken restfulness,
A fulness of deep peace that fell like balm
On soul and sense together, and instilled
Hope and expectancy of coming bliss
Like that of happy childhood's careless hours :
Even as the dismal twilight of the Shades
Breeds sense of present gloom and future care,
Dull apathy, and vague forebodings, dark
With doubtful shadows of impending ill,
Appalling, though unknown and undefined,
Yet terrible the more because unknown :—
But rather did that far-off Eastern haze
Allure the spirit as with pleasing sense
Of mystery and of distance, magical,
Wherein Imagination rioted,
Framing Elysiums in the space beyond,
And peopling them with marvels, like a child
Whose errant fancy deems some unknown road

A path to other worlds, and idly weaves
Strange fairy lands behind the distant hills.

“‘ O Queen,’ I cried, ‘ this land is beautiful
With beauty far exceeding aught on earth,
A very dream of utter loveliness,
In uttermost perfection, unsurpassed,
And unsurpassable,—for, as I deem,
Not all the subtlest skill of Gods or men
Could better it. Much have I heard thereof
In childhood from my father Hesperus,
Yea and much more imagined afterwards ;
So much so that I hardly thought to find,
As now I find, the bare reality
More lovely than the dream : yet verily
That which I see but now beneath mine eyes
So palsies all description, that, methinks,
Were I but mistress of this paradise,
No other realm,—no, not Olympus’ self,
With all its starry wealth of gold and gem,
Should buy it of me ; for indeed it seems
Brighter than dreams of heaven, more beautiful
Than the incarnate Spirit of the Earth,—

Fairer than Love, and peacefuller than Peace.—
O Queen, thou hast a goodly heritage !’

“ Whereto she answered, smiling mournfully :
‘ Were this but mine, then were I well content ;
Nor any more than thou, would I exchange,
Even for Olympus : but it is not mine.
Doth this amaze thee ? Yea, I know full well
That Hades spake as though the land were
his,

And yet it is not so. No part or lot
Have I or Hades in Elysium,
More than an empty name of suzerainty ;
For these be Rhadamanthus’ realms, not his,
Else were it no Elysium, woe is me !
For as the ruler is, the land is, too ;
The Shades as Hades, dark, inexorable,
And merciless alike to Gods and men,
Save those, as thou, to whom the Fates incline :
Elysium as Rhadamanthus, bright
With summer and warm sunshine, and the calm
Of deepest peace and sweet serenity.
For Rhadamanthus is not as my lord,

But that which this his land proclaimeth him,
A king of light, not darkness,—merciful
And upright, single-hearted, courteous,
And just with perfect justice, absolute,
Unmoved by fear, unshaken by caprice,
Unstained by greed of gain or lust of power :
So that his justice is proverbial
Among the Gods themselves, whose justice oft
Is but self-interest, or idle whim,
And not as his, right for the sake of right—
Ay, and before all else, beyond all else,
Let wheedle or let threaten whoso will,
Though it were Zeus himself : for formerly
When Rhadamanthus was appointed judge
Concerning certain matters in dispute
'Twixt Zeus and Hades, Rhadamanthus gave
Sentence for Hades, whom he loveth not,
Though Zeus had offered him a mighty bribe
To judge unjustly. Such an one is he :
Just wholly, and true wholly, not in part :
Impartial, iron-willed in rectitude,
Yet no-wise stern, but mild and placable,
Hated and feared by none, save only those

Who hate the light because their deeds are dark,
And truth because they know themselves untrue.'

"So saying, she brought her dragons to the earth
Beside a lake, upon whose flowery shore
There rose a marble palace, white as snow,
Huge as the dwelling of some Titan prince,
With massive columns carved of porphyry,
Blood-red against the ground of spotless white,
Artistic, beautiful exceedingly.
And as I gazed upon the splendid pile,
Within my mind there grew a wondering sense
Of recognition, indistinct and vague,
As though my soul had wandered there in dreams,
And sought to weld once more the broken chain
Of some half-recollection, blurred and dim,
That lay in fragments on my memory,
So that I knew the place, yet knew it not :
And vainly for a while I strove to grasp
The fugitive idea, that slipped away,
Like water from the lips of Tantalus,
Eluding me the more the more I strove
To overtake its flight with questioning,—

But, as I turned the current of my thoughts
On other things, and strove to banish it,
Returning back unbidden, haunting me
With twofold force and strange persistency :
Whereto a further dawning consciousness
Was added presently, that shaped itself
To sense of likeness plainly visible,
Yet tempered with dissimilarity :
And now these twin perceptions, mingling, formed
One composite perception, which my mind
Revolving vainly, strove to integrate
To aught more definite ; till, suddenly,
With lightning speed my memory caught the clue,
Whereat I cried aloud in wonderment,—
‘ O Queen, is this indeed reality,
Or do I walk in dreams ? for verily,
Save for its vast proportions, and those shafts
Of blood-red porphyry, yon stately pile
Seems hardly other than mine own abode :
For every sculptured symbol on the walls,
And every column, base and capital,
In every smallest detail, line for line,
And curve for curve, yea, almost stone for stone,

With most minute and marvellous accuracy,
Are one in both alike.' Whereat the Queen,
Who all the while stood by in silence, turned
Full on my face the darkness of her eyes,
And questioned, 'Did not Atlas build that
house

Wherein ye live?' Whereto I answered, 'Yea :
And in the self-same fashion as his own,
Which Zeus demolished in the Titans' war.'
Then, strangely smiling, spake Persephoné :
'When thou returnest once again to earth,
Demand of Atlas that he tell to thee
Whether the columns of his dwelling-place
Were hewn of crystal or of porphyry :
For even as each man buildeth for himself,
So build they for him in Elysium :
And this shall be unto thee for a sign,
When that whereof this palace is the shade
Shall stand revealed in substance : more than
this

I may not tell, nor mayst thou learn thyself,
Except indeed thou commune with the Hour
That standeth on the threshold veiled and mute,

For I can lift the veil and loose the tongue,
And if thou question it shall answer thee.'

"Then answering spake I to Persephoné :
'O Queen, not negligently, nor in vain,
Have I, the daughter of the Evening Star,
Pondered on hidden things this many a year,
Reading the secret writings of the Fates
In noontide vision or in midnight dream,
By light that never shone on mortal eyes,
And by strong spells constraining things unborn
To issue forth untimely from the womb
Of Darkness, holding converse with my soul
As though they were ;—not vainly has my lore
Fathomed the blackness of the void, and heard
The voice of Silence wax articulate,
Till heaven and earth, yea, and the vast abyss,
Tingling with voices, grew one mystic speech
Of awful revelation, uttering forth
That inner soul of deep significance
Whose body is the visible Universe :
Which of itself is dumb and meaningless,
As is the crabbéd cypher of a scroll,

Writ in the elder time by some dead sage,
To him that lacks the clue,—which, found, resolves
The dark enigma to a potent spell,
Opening strange doors of knowledge.—Not in vain
Have I explored the Future and the Past,
Gathering light from light and lore from lore,
Till now, grown keen, my spiritual sight,
Dawning to intuition, oft-times sees,
Without the conscious effort of my will,
The shadow on the dial of the Fates
Move forward, falling on an unknown hour,
So that my soul discerns instinctively
The things that are to be in after days.
And now, methinks, I read the mystery
Of this same palace, or at least in part :
Yet fain were I to commune with the Hour
That standeth on the threshold, and to prove
This matter to the uttermost, and sift
Surmise from certainty,—for everything
That toucheth Atlas, toucheth also us
His nieces, daughters of the Evening Star.'

“ So saying, I moved towards the open door,

And close behind me came Persephoné ;
And lo ! upon the threshold stood the Hour,
A misty form, wrapped in a veil of mist,
Like some dense vaporous column, rising white
At sundown from dead wastes of stagnant marsh
And melancholy reed-beds dank and lone,
Where leaden-coloured waters slowly crawl
'Twixt swampy banks down to the listless sea.

“‘What art thou, O mysterious Shape,’ I cried,
‘That standest on the threshold of these halls,
Ghostly and mute and veiled like Destiny?
Art thou indeed the shade of things to be,
A pale thought dawning in the mind of Fate,
That presently shall mould itself to deed,
Or art thou but illusion ? Speak, I pray :
Unveil thyself, thou mockery of a form,
And let me see thy face and hear thy voice,
For I would commune with thee :’—but the Hour
Drew closer still the veil about its face,
And answered not. Whereat Persephoné
Stepped forward, speaking thus in measured tones,
Calm yet imperious : ‘ By the power of Night,

And by the ebon sceptre of the Shades,
Whose slave thou art till thine appointed time,
I bid thee cast aside thy cloudy veil
And show thyself and answer.' Then the Hour,
As though constrained by some resistless spell,
Unloosed the veil, that fell in filmy folds,
Slow-sinking from the unsubstantial brows,
Down to the waist, till mingling with the robe
That, vaguely fluttering, swam like mountain mist
About the feet, it hung in graceful wreaths
Of gauzy texture round a phantom form,
In fashion like the ghost of some dead maid
Whose nebulous features, darkly beautiful,
Set round with clustering curls of raven hair,
Smiled timorously, a sweet yet wistful smile,
Sad as with shadows of departed pain,
Yet holy and serene like infant Peace,
Newborn upon the midnight of Despair.

"Behold, O Ægle,' said Persephoné,
'This fateful Hour is fair and fortunate,
Though saddened o'er with passing clouds of pain,
Even as those changeful hours of early spring,

Not wholly sunny, yet not wholly sad,—
Glad with the death of winter's barrenness,
And rich with promise of a brighter day,
Though presently bedimmed with rainy tears :—
And even as the face is, so the voice,
And as the voice the burden of its speech,
Not wholly glad, nor wholly sorrowful,
Yet with excess of gladness over grief,
A little bitter in a honied draught,
Sweet to the lips and soothing to the soul
That drinks, and sleeps awhile the sleep of Death,
Short as the watches of a summer night,
Then wakes again with dawn to life renewed,
In happier lands, beneath serener skies,
Where all the malice of unkindly Fate
Has spent itself, like lightning when the storm
Breaks, and the sun bursts out behind the clouds,
Wakening the silenced voice of bird and bee,
And wandering through the weft of latticed leaves,
Gemmed thickly o'er with sparkling pearls of rain,
Like Beauty's smile that dawns through happy
tears,
Lovelier for sorrow.—If so be that thou

Wouldst probe this hidden matter to the quick,
Ask of the Hour while yet she stands unveiled,
And of a surety she shall answer thee.'

"Then turning to the Hour, I questioned thus :
'What art thou?'—and the Hour, in murmurous
tones,

Vague as the night-wind's inarticulate breath
Sighing through whispering reeds, made answer
thus :

'An Hour of tears, and laughter mixed with
tears,

An Hour of joy, and sorrow mixed with joy,
Am I, the Hour of Atlas' victory,
Unborn as yet, though struggling into birth,
Obedient to the fixed decrees of Fate :
For Atlas, whensoever I am born,
Shall mount triumphant on my soaring wings,
And hither shall I bear him through the Night,
To dwell for ever in these happy halls,
Honoured of Rhadamanthus, and beloved
By all men : and the memory of his woes,
And all the sorrow of the weary past,

Shall be but as a dream that dies at dawn,
Slain by the arrows of the conquering sun.'

"With that the murmuring accents died away :
Then, as I questioned further, spake again :
'Ask me no more, for I have told thee all ;
It is not I that answer, but the Fates :
And even as thou understandest me,
So much is it ordained that thou shouldst
 know

Of that which is to be, not more nor less :
For I am but a pale unbodied Shade,
A thing that is, yet is not : naught I know
Of mine own proper self, for I am naught ;
No substance have I, nor identity,
More than the shadow of a drifting cloud :
Yet even as the presence of the shade
Hath power upon the senses to reveal
The consciousness of substance, so my form,
Although it be but void and emptiness,
Is earnest of the Future, and my voice
A faint Æolian echo of the strain
Sung to the silence by the winds of Doom.'

“ ‘She speaketh sooth, O Ægle,’ said the Queen,
‘Thou hast the utmost burthen of her tale :
For I myself came hither yesterday,
And that which thou hast heard, I also heard,
Nor could she answer further. Rest content :
And grieve not overmuch for Atlas’ sake,
For thus shall he be freed, not otherwise.

Now let us hasten hence ; it waxes late,
And I must journey home to Hades’ halls.
And as for thee, pale Shadow, veil thyself,
And keep thy watch in silence till thine hour
Of birth, for I release thee from my spell.’

“ So spake the Queen ; and, as we turned away,
Like some dense pillar of ascending smoke,
Bowed by a fitful breath of passing wind,
The Hour stooped downwards, clutching at her veil
With shadowy hands, and o’er her shadowy face
Drew back its shrouding folds, and silently
Stood brooding on the threshold as before :
While sadly, silent hardly less than she,
I sat myself within the dragon-car,
Beside the sombre Queen, scarce heeding aught

Of all that wondrous landscape, which so late
Had tranced my gaze with lavish loveliness :
So that I hardly looked, or turned my head,
To bid farewell to that sweet land of rest,
When, darting through the portal of the Shades,
We left the bright Elysian day behind
To plunge again into the dismal night
Of Hades' realms,—but, buried deep in thought,
Sat vacantly, revolving many things
Within my anxious and unquiet mind,
That, hovering 'twixt extremes of grief and joy,
Now sorrowed bitterly for Atlas' death,
Now joyed, exulting in the happy fate
Decreed to him by righteous Destiny.
Thus pensively I rode beside the Queen
In silence, and in silence reached the gates
Of Hades' palace, and in silence passed
Through echoing halls and gloomy corridors
Back to the chamber of Persephoné,
Which seemed indeed the solitary spot,—
The one sole star of languid light that pierced
The desert darkness of that drear abode,
Which twined its serpent-folds about the breast,

Strangling the heart with suffocating sense
Of blank, and desolation, and the load
Of cold oppression, and the tardy flight
Of leaden-weighted hours of loneliness,
Dull isolation, and the cheerless void
Of utter emptiness, and endless night.
And there I cast me down upon a couch,
And, sick at heart with grief and melancholy,
Wept bitterly, as weeps a helpless child
Unjustly punished for another's fault ;
Whose tortured spirit, stung with burning sense
Of utter impotence, and rankling wrong,
Wails, crushed and cowed by anger, fear, and shame,
Mingling to overpowering consciousness
As of some canker in the soul of life,
Some dread omnipotence of ruthless Ill,
Strong as despair or death, whose pitiless arm
Sways its red scourge above a cowering world,
That writhes and pleads in vain :—or with such tears
As scald the soul of slandered innocence,
Stabbed by the poisonous babble of a fool,
Who, from the depths of his ignoble soul,
Loathing the whiteness of that purity

Which shames his own corrupted nature, flings
His tributary filth,—with brutish joy
Rejoicing in his anguished victim's woe.—
Thus hopelessly and helplessly I wept
Tears bitterer far than any shed on earth
By those that weep to see Death's ruthless hand
Outstretched to pluck the fading flower of Life;
Not tears of holy sorrow, such as fall
From eyes that, gazing on beloved eyes
Now closed for ever in their final sleep,
Grow dim with woe, most tender, most divine,
Hallowed by sacred memories, deep as Love,
Stronger than death, and through all change and
 loss,
Sweet with the clinging scent of perished joy,—
But tears of scorching pain and fierce revolt,
Wrung from me as by shame, and wrath, and wrong,
And red disgrace, and wordless agony,
Intolerable, yet irremediable.
And thus I wept and groaned in heaviness,
Not otherwise than one cast out from heaven;
For on my heart the sorrow and the gloom
Of those infernal regions, fastening, closed

Their hellish grip : nor could the pitying Queen,
For all her gracious kindness, comfort me.

“ Then from the wall she took a little lute,
And deftly in and out among the strings
Her fingers fluttered like a fluttering bird,
Waking sweet sounds of wandering melody,
Vague as the music of the winds of Space,
Yet soft and soothing as a mother’s voice,
Or evening songs of distant nightingales,
Heard fluting far through flowering myrtle-groves,
While from the East the hovering twilight strays,
And all the West blossoms as one red rose
Crimsoned with kisses of the dying sun.

“ And ever as the mystic music flowed,
The bitter sense of shame and anguished pain
Fell from my spirit, and my troubled heart
Grew placid as a windless, sunless sea,
And all the torment of my writhen mind
Fled like the horrid phantoms of a dream :
Only a soft delicious melancholy
Pervaded all my senses, soothing them

With chastened sorrow, touched by transient beams
Of happiness, as when some weeping cloud
Catches the sun and smiles. Then dreamily
The dark Queen swept her fingers o'er the strings,
And from the pallid roses of her lips
Trembling to song, burst forth a passionate strain,
So wildly sad, so weirdly beautiful,
It seemed the perfect voice of utter woe,
Utterly sweet : and thus the burthen ran :

“ ‘ Soft sighs the summer breeze through Enna’s
vale,
Through Enna’s vale beside the whispering sea :
Warm shines the summer sun on woodbines pale,
Red roses, and the frail anemone :—
Ah ! woe is me ! Alas, Persephoné !

“ ‘ Dark lowers the nether midnight’s cheerless
noon,
Dark as dim caverns of the lampless sea,
Deep-drowned beyond all light of sun or moon,
Sad as the hopeless stings of Memory :—
Ah, woe ! Ah, woe ! Alas Persephoné !

“ ‘ Bright shines Night’s barren crown with many a
gem,

Yet never more by stream or flowery lea
Shall these sad brows forget their diadem—
Their crown of desolation,—and be free :—
Alas, Persephoné ! Alas for me !

“ ‘ A simple maid through woods and flowers astray,
Who then so careless or so blithe as she ?—
Queen of the Night that knows not any day,
What ray of hope remains for her or me ?—
Alas ! alas ! for lost Persephoné !’

“ She ceased ; and from the depth of those sad eyes
Two pearly tear-drops, slowly gathering, fell
Down the pale lilies of her cheeks, like dew
From white narcissus-blossoms, when the breeze
Of sunrise gently shakes their delicate bells
That wave i’ the wind to some sweet voiceless tune
Of virgin passion pure as softest snows,
Yet warm as sun-kissed roses.—Cold and still,
A quiet lake, of depth unfathomable,
Was that calm face, so dark, so beautiful,

Strong with the strength of silence and of night,—
A dusky flower fulfilled with odorous breath,
And healing balm of pity. Warm and chill,
And dark and white, and cold and passionate,
With strange admixture of strange opposites,—
Such was the awful Lady of the Dead.

“ Silent awhile she sat regarding me,
As Night looks down upon the dreaming earth,
From waste abysses of untrodden Space,—
So near she seemed, and yet so far removed
In distance and in darkness, infinite
As is the vast horizon of the soul,—
Then gently laid her hand upon my brows,
Clothing her hidden thoughts in words like these :
‘ Be of good cheer, O daughter of the Light,
For that which seemeth evil is but good,
Seen darkly through the darkness. Well I know
The cause of thy distress, for I myself
Have suffered, even as thou sufferest now,
When first I entered these unblest abodes :
For though I came with pomp and majesty,
Crowned Queen of Night, and Lady of the Dead,

The horror of this place gat hold on me,
So that my heart was filled with heaviness,
And all my senses frozen with despair,
Even as thine : for though I loved my lord,
I loved not this his realm, but hated it,
And all the evil things that swarm therein,
With loathing fierce as madness. Hope and
Peace

Seemed empty mockeries, and the ghost of Joy
A fell hallucination, born to lure
The spirit to destruction. Year on year,
Throughout the changeless seasons, evermore
The grey monotonous twilight numbed my brain,
The stony silence crushed and stifled me,
And every deed of shame and cruelty,
Done or endured throughout this land of ill,
Seemed to my clouded and distempered mind
Or done by me, or else endured by me :
So that I wellnigh deemed myself accurst,
Cast out from all communion with the Gods,
For countless crimes of nameless infamy.
And of all other thoughts that wake the mind
To sense of being or of consciousness,

These twain alone were branded on my soul,
Eternal Night, and fathomless Despair.'

“‘Yet ever as the dull years winged their flight,
My sorrow, slowly lessening, died away
Into a rayless calm, as cold and still
As the white silence of a frozen lake,
Soft-shrouded deep in drifted snows : and oft
So empty, pale, and dreamlike seems my life,
So void of all emotion, sweet or sad,
I hardly know myself, if I myself,
My lord, and all this dreary realm of Night,
Are aught beyond the shadows of a shade,—
An idle dream that in an idle hour
Beguiles the brain of slumbering Destiny
With incoherent phantasies, which thence,
Flung outwards on the curtain of the void,
Flit up and down in antic mimicry,
Until they almost deem themselves in deed
That which they are in semblance. Many a time
Imagination and reality,
Subjective thought, objective entity,
All that which is, and of its proper self

Exists, and that which only seems to be,
Grow so confused and mingled in my mind,
I hardly know if anything be real :
Or whether all things, Gods and men alike,
Sun, moon, and stars, and planets, night and day,
Past, present, future, Earth, and Heaven, and Hell,
Yea, Destiny herself,—be aught but dreams.

“ But thou, to whom the darkness and the gloom
Are awful and abhorrent,—thou whose life
Is of the light, as mine was of the light,
Ere the brief springtime of my budding morn
Died in untimely winter,—thou whose soul
Is as a rose that sickens in the dark,—
Who seemest hardly other than the self
I left behind me in that happier time,
So long ago,—so distant, yet so dear,—
I bid thee sleep until the morrow morn,
For thus and thus alone shalt thou escape
The horror of these regions : and though fain
Were I to speak with thee of many things,
Yet for thine own sake must I rest content :
For though my songs have power upon the soul

To banish pain and sorrow, and dispel
The spectral fears that haunt this dismal den,
Yet long ere morn thou wouldst be nigh distraught
With phantom dread, and dreams of doubt and
death,

Groundless indeed, yet not less terrible
In shadow than in substance. Frail and thin
At all times, even beneath the daytime sun,
Is that fine gossamer veil 'twixt dream and deed;
And in the dim abysses of the Night
Impalpable,—so that the shadowy fear
Becomes its own fulfilment, and the ill
Dreaded is suffered also. This is part
Of the fell blight of this accurséd land,
Which withereth all things fair and beautiful,
As it hath withered me, its hapless Queen.'

"So saying, with fixed and concentrated gaze
She turned the luminous darkness of her eyes
Full upon mine, and softly whispered, 'Sleep!
Sleep, and forget the sorrows of the Night,
Its haunting fears, its brooding melancholy:
Take thou the one good gift I have to give,

Rest and forgetfulness. O weary soul,
I cast my spirit upon thee, saying, Sleep !'

" And, bending down, she kissed me on the brows
With icy lips, the while she softly sang :

" ' By the slumber of the stone
In the bosom of the deep,
By the wind's low undertone
In the poppied fields of Sleep ;
By the power of Life and Death,
By the passing of the breath,
By the falling of the wave
And the silence of the grave,—
I, the Queen Persephoné,
Set thy troubled spirit free !

" ' By the glamour of the moon
Dreaming on the dreaming sea,
By the trance and by the swoon,
And the birth of things to be :—
By the power of this my spell
Stronger than the strength of Hell,—

I, the Queen Persephoné,
Bid its formless phantoms flee,
Banish every thought of pain
Far from slumbering sense and brain.

“ ‘By the dull Lethean stream,
By the night that knows no morrow,
By the vision and the dream,
And the songs that stifle sorrow ;—
By the spirit’s viewless flight,
I, the Lady of the Night,
Queen of all the world below,
Sign and shield thee from all woe :
Restless heart and eyes that weep
Drink the drowsy dews of Sleep !’

“ So sang the Queen : but, ere she ceased her song,
Deep slumber softly settled on my sense,
So that the music, like a rising tide,
Low-rippling into sweet unconsciousness,
Broke wave-like on the silent shores of Sleep,
And died away, dissolved in happy dreams
Of winds and sunshine, and the balmy breath

Of flowers a-bloom in fair Elysian vales,
And streams that steal through beds of amaranth,
By fairy grottoes in sequestered glades
Where Dryad-haunted nooks and forest-lawns
Lie nestling, veiled by immemorial boughs.

“How long I slept I knew not : Space and Time
Were clean abolished, and my wandering sense
Grown Psyche-winged, with swift aerial flight
Ran rioting at will through endless scenes,
Each lovelier than the last. Perpetual change,
Linked with perpetual beauty, everywhere
Companioned me, and lured my erring steps
From bower to bower, as idly as a bee
Lost in a world of flowers. But when the dream
Faded at last, I saw the sombre eyes
Of the pale Queen still gazing into mine,
As though I had but slept a moment’s space,
Whereat I closed my eyes once more, and cried,
‘Let me dream on! I have dreamt the fairest
dream
That ever fell from Heaven to lighten Hell.
Let me not wake to darkness and despair :

Oh! let me dream until to-morrow morn,
Sweet lady, I beseech thee!' Then the Queen
Spake gently: 'Yea, I know thy dreams were fair,
As ever are the dreams of those who sleep
Lulled by the subtle magic of those songs
Wherewith I soothe the anguish of the Shades.
For though—save only those in Tartarus,—
They suffer naught of pain or punishment,
So deadly and so dismal is this place,
And with so cold a chill its darkness lies
About the heart, that those who dwell therein
Endure a hundred years of doubt and dread,
At end whereof they pass to painless calm,
And seek the solace of my songs no more.

But now arise, and quickly follow me,
For noon is past, and at the landing-place
Waits Charon, chafing at thy long delay,
And Hades' messenger hath brought the hat,
Which now I give thee, with this cruise of oil,
To light thee in the darkness of the cave.—
Come, let us go together to the barge.'

"Then straightway from her hands I took the hat,

Low-murmuring grateful thanks : whereat she sighed
Sadly, as though some transitory cloud,
Some shadow of regret at parting, dimmed
Her spirit, troubling its tremendous calm ;
Yet nothing did she speak, but like a ghost,
With beckoning finger bade me follow her,
And gliding on before me through the halls
Of dreary darkness and the brazen gates
Of that grim palace, led me to the banks
Of reedy Styx, where, moored against the side,
Old Charon's barge lay floating motionless
Above the oily waters dark and cold,
Upon whose waste and melancholy marge
We stayed our steps and halted. Far and wide,
The dead morass lay blackening in the gloom
Of that funereal twilight hushed and lone,
Whose sullen stupor steeped the sickening soul
In dews as of the grave. A raving wind
Roamed fitfully across the dismal wilds :
While, ever and anon, the sluggish wave
Swelled shorewards, and with dreary monotone,
Dull as the deathly whisper of Despair,
Heard in the silence of some hopeless heart,

Ran lapping through the reeds about the brink.
And everywhere, in countless multitudes,
Pale shadowy phantoms, frail as morning mist,
Fled flickering through the tangled bulrush-brakes,
Blown by the desolate breeze, whose wintry gusts
Sighed mournfully among the sighing reeds.

“ And standing there beside the dusky stream,
In that sad land of night and loneliness,
Saddening we looked into each other's eyes,
With one long lingering gaze, like youthful friends
Who meet again with half a life between,—
Yet meet to part.—And all my soul was filled
With deep compassion for the lonely fate
Of that dark Queen, throned utterly alone
In endless night : and she, with wistful eyes,
Whose hidden pain bemocked the stony calm
Of that set face, stood silent, watching me :
And with my soul I read the secret speech
Of eyes and features,—and the features spake
Indifference, but those wild eyes despair.

“ Mutely awhile we stood : then heavily

The pale lids drooping veiled her hopeless eyes,
And sighingly she spake and wearily :
' The hour is come ! Farewell, O child of Light !
Bright daughter of the silver Evening Star,—
Glad sunbeam of thy father's radiant orb
Strayed downwards to the darkness,—Fare thee
well ! '

“ ' Farewell, dread Queen,' I answered, bending low,
' And for thy kindness take my duteous thanks,
The reverent offering of a grateful heart,
Which I will strive to pay more worthily
When thou shalt visit me beneath the sun.—
Till then, Farewell ! '—' Farewell for evermore ! '
She answered solemnly : ' for know, O Nymph,
When summer noon is cold as winter night,
When stars and sun forsake the upper sky
To lighten this our kingdom of the Dead,
When springtime scares the swallow from the North,
And autumn sends her shivering to the Pole,
When Truth is Falsehood, and when night is day,—
When these things come to pass, shall thou and I
Stand once again together, face to face,

The noonday with the midnight.—Go in peace.
And if the love of one so dark and cold,
Wake any echo in thy bosom, know
Thou hast the love of sad Persephoné,
Deep as the grave, and tender as the night.—
For ever and for ever, fare thee well !'

“ She ceased,—and motioned me towards the barge :
Whereat I stepped on board, and in the stern
Sat silent, gazing on the silent Queen,
While Charon thrust the prow from off the side,
And slowly paddling reached the middle stream :
And down the sluggish current, drifting slow,
The lazy boat crawled onwards like a snail,
Furrowing the putrid waves with slimy wake.
And long as eye could pierce the gathering gloom
Slow-settling down upon the lonely strand,
I saw the ghostly figure of the Queen,
Like some tall statue standing motionless,
With eyes intent upon the lessening boat.
Then, as the last faint outlines of her form,
Fast-mingling with the darkness, disappeared,
She waved a farewell greeting with her hand,

And vanished in the distance and the haze.
And over all that waste and dreary scene,
The silence and the twilight reigned alone.

“Then idly creeping through the still lagoons
That link the ninefold circle of the Styx
Into one straight and stagnant water-way,
Far-stretching from the central citadel
Of Hades’ empire, to the hither side,
The tardy boat drew onwards, hour on hour,
Slow as the watches of a sleepless night
From dark to dawn, when, in his yearly course
Down the bright Zodiac Phœbus halts his car
In rainy Capricornus, circling swift,
With sickly beams, low on the Southern sky.

“Interminable seemed that weary voyage,
Through endless labyrinths of marsh and fen,
Silent as death, save for the wind’s low song
Among the whispering wastes of squalid reeds,
And the black water’s melancholy moan.
And silently I sat within the stern,
Watching the gliding water loitering past,

The while the gloomy oarsman from the bows
Plied the monotonous oars that dipped and rose
Like ragged arms of cypress, waving dim,
Through mist and rain, over a nettly grave.
And thus, with head bowed down, and vacant
brain,

I gazed upon the sullen water's swirl,
Half-tranced, until my senses reeled and swam,
And hardly did I know myself alive.

"How long we floated down the dismal stream
I know not : for the changeless landscape showed
No shifting shadows, and the vaulted gloom,
Unchangeable alike by night and day,
Was as a sunless dial, marking not
The wingless passage of the drowsy hours,
And Time himself seemed swooning on to death,
Or blank annihilation : but, at last,
After long listless hours that dragged like years,
I heard the shingle grating on the keel,
And, starting from my sombre reverie,
Looked out ahead and saw the barren strand,
Rocky and herbless, stretch for many a mile

Far out into the twilight,—and the boat
Drew to the margin of the mere, and stayed :
And Charon cast the anchor overboard,
Grumbling, ‘ Depart.’—Whereat I leaped on shore,
And fled across the stony wilderness,
Till, lighting on the track whereby I came,
I followed it for many a weary league,
Back to the boundary of the world of Night.
And in the nether entrance of the cave,
Where the dull twilight died in utter gloom,
I stayed and lit my lamp, and, hurrying, passed
On through the darkness to the upper air.—
And, as I stood beneath the open sky,
The horror of the Shades fell off from me,
So that I sang and laughed aloud for joy,
Then laid me down upon a grassy bank,
Revelling in all the richness of the sun.

“ How sweet it is from some long night of pain
To wake, when Eos opes her gates of gold,
While from the dewy grass the soaring lark
Springs carolling his pæan of the morn
Against the gates of Heaven, and all the air

Grows tremulous with stroke of fanning wings,
And twittering notes of birds, wakening the dawn
With herald voices hymning in the birth
Of the new light that, like the spirit of Hope,
Dawns from the death of darkness.—Sweet, oh!
sweet,

Beyond all speech of rarest eloquence,
The simple joys of being, and the smile
Of the long sunshine dreaming through the flowers
Dew-laden, and the sharp keen scents of morn!
Yet sweeter far from that black night below
To wake once more to sense of earthly life,
And feel the gladdening pulses of the day
Course rich and warm about the frozen heart,
Loosening the icy fetters of despair,
With liberating beams of light and life!"

With that she ceased, and sighed a happy sigh,
Like one who casts a nightmare from his breast,
Starting awake from horror-haunted dreams
To consciousness of some remembered joy;
And smilingly she gazed on Perseus' face,
Turning the soulful mirrors of her eyes

Full upon his : and as the rosy light
Upon the hills of morning was her smile.

Entranced they listened to the wondrous tale,
Then joyfully arose and hastened home ;
And swiftly flew the wingéd hours to dawn.

BOOK VII.

HOW PERSEUS SLEW THE GORGON.

SHADOW and shine!—A landscape of the North,
Now bright with sunbeams and now dim with
clouds,

At morning fair, ere evening veiled in rain,—
Or like the year of some capricious clime,
Fickle alike in sunshine and in storm,
Yet ever tending more to tears than smiles,
Brief summer, lingering autumn, winter, drear
With harpings of the melancholy wind,
And the dead hush of snowfields waste and white,
Dreaming beneath the pale December moon,—
Such is the chequered life of mortal Man!

Shadow and shine alternate! Night and day:

A cyclic round of seasons, infinite
In variation, and unchangeable
Alone in changeless constancy of Change,
So runs the life of Man from birth to grave :
Springtime of Youth, the childhood of the soul,
Wide-eyed and wondering, green with wakening
life :

Summer of strenuous will, and ripening powers,
Whose flushed exuberance of vitality
Impels to effort and accomplishment,—
Strong Summer, all too beautiful and fleet,
Vocal with passion-breathing songs of Love,
Nightingale-throated !—Autumn saddening o'er
With dying flowers of Hope, and reddening leaves
Of young ideals withering slowly down
Beneath the frosts of Age and Apathy
To barren disillusion, and the dearth
Of half-achievement, lessening energies,
And adverse Circumstance, which warp and crush
The spirit that aforetime strongly dared
Some noble work, but now stands idly by
While feet less fleet, whose pathway to success
It pioneered, surpass it in the race,

And narrower brows receive the laurel crown :—
Winter of sorrow and the desolate ache
Of evanescence, loss and emptiness,
When the once wingéd soul that scaled the skies
Sinks heavily to earth with plumeless vans,
Helpless and maimed,—perchance to rise no more,
Perchance to flutter on despairingly
With painful effort towards the distant goal,
Dying at last on some lone Pisgah's height,
With hopeless eyes fixed on the Promised Land.

Sunshine and shade! Such is the history
Of every soul of Man beneath the sun :
A little shadow flecks the fairest sky,
A little sunshine gilds the stormiest day,—
Then evening, and the mystery of the night.

'Tis sad to watch the death of happy days,
Whose ever-lessening sands sink swiftly down,
In sure remorseless sequence, one by one,
Ere with the falling of the latest grain
Time's fleshless fingers turn the hourglass,
And all their joys be gathered to the past.

Thus, numbering every moment as it fled,
Did Perseus and the Nymphs await the hour
Of parting,—and each passing moment seemed
The echo of a voice that sobbed “Farewell.”

From Eos' halls beneath the Eastern wave
Laughing arose the careless morn : the deep,
Profoundly calm, lay sparkling like a gem
'Neath skies of ardent sapphire : earth and sea
Basked lazily in golden light, fulfilled
With strange intensity of rest : the leaves,
Stirred by no faintest breath of wandering breeze,
Slept movelessly upon the slumbering boughs,
While loudly, through the perfume-breathing air,
Populous with bees and painted butterflies,
Thrilled up the thrush's joyous matin-song,
That like a sparkling fountain rose and fell
Upon the thirsty ear of listening morn,
Now surging high with rich voluminous swell,
Now breaking into bubbling cadences,
And clear harmonious rain of rippling notes,
Leading the music of the feathery choir,
Whose modulated voices, crystal-clear,

Welled up from every thicket, copse, and brake,
In one perpetual long-drawn ecstasy :
As though all Nature, in ironic glee,
Made holiday, and with untimely mirth
Conspired to mock the inward heaviness
Of those unquiet and foreboding hearts,
That, sad with pain of parting and of loss,
Chafed restlessly amid the general calm.

Listless they roamed about the flowery land,
And ever and anon with curious eyes
Gazed vacantly on each familiar scene,
Marvelling to find a sense of strangeness steal
O'er every well-known haunt, whose altered face
Was as a landscape mirrored in a lake,
The same yet not the same : for Nature's soul
Is ever as the soul of him who sees,—
Shadow and reflex of the conscious thought
That, lightening through its blank immensity,
Flashes its beams upon the soulless void,
And by its inner light beholds the world
Joyous or sad, with every changing mood
That brightens or that dims the eyes that see.

And now the morn was high : the climbing sun
Coursed swiftly towards the zenith, and the shade
Of herb and tree shrank lessening momentarily,
While Atlas' crag drew in its shadowy horn,
That hour by hour crept nearer to the base
To Northwards : and beside the palace gates
The Nymphs and Perseus stayed their wandering
steps,

And gazing on each other silently
Stood waiting, for they knew the hour was come.
And sorrowfully thus did Perseus speak :
" O Nymphs adieu !—The fulness of the heart
Swells to the lips and chokes my utterance,
So that I cannot give my thanks due speech.
Yet if, as well I deem, your secret lore
Can read the hearts of men, discerning there
Their honour or their baseness, turn your eyes
On mine, laid bare before you to the core,
And ye shall find it one bright flawless gem
Of deepest reverence, love, and gratitude.
For know that through all change or accident
That may befall henceforward till he die,
Your memories shall live in Perseus' soul

Unwithered, ever green and fresh and new,
When all things else have faded clean away
Into oblivion, dust, and nothingness.
Yea even in death,—if this our conscious life
Be aught beyond a pale dissolving dream,
Wrecked on the rocks of morning, and dispersed
Like driving mist before the storms of Time
In myriad atom-streams, never again
To re-assemble, wakening into thought,—
Still shall he worship, bless, and honour ye
For ever. Fare ye well, ye spotless flowers,
Ye soul and sum of all things beautiful !
Living or dying, surely I am blest,
If only to have known that this sad earth
Holds beings such as ye, so wise, so fair,
So good, so gracious, far beyond all thought,—
Beyond all dream !”—“Farewell, bright child of
Zeus,”

They murmured brokenly : “May all success
And happiness go with thee evermore ;
And may thy sire preserve thee from all ill,
And Pallas guard thee”—Here their faltering speech
Gave place to weeping, and they sobbed aloud.

Yet wherefore linger o'er those last farewells,
So sadly sweet, so strangely sorrowful?—
Ye who have watched the setting of the Star
Of Evening, when beneath the Western wave
It sinks to rise no more, ere, journeying slow,
About the sun, through regions of lone space
Unfathomable, wellnigh infinite,
It re-appears above the gates of Morn,
Another, yet the same,—ye only know
How blankly the grey veil of twilight falls
About the sunset when its silver eye
Looks down no longer with benignant beam
Upon the darkening earth.—Ye who have seen
The white sail glimmering down the cloudy sea,
That wings the rapid flight of half your life
To alien shores and perils manifold,—
Ye know full well how cold and desolate,
How void of hope, how fraught with speechless pain
And loneliness, is this one word, “Farewell.”

The Gods are cruel.—Would that they could bear
Awhile the miseries they inflict, and know
The pains of birth and death, of hope and fear,

Of transient happiness and lasting grief,
And thankless toil that spends itself for naught,
In bootless struggle with unkindly fate,
Ending in barren failure, and the woes
Of severed friendships, hopeless Love's despair,
And the long ache of Life's deep emptiness !
For then might wretched mortals hope to find
Mercy and justice at the hands of Heaven.

Vain is the wish ! Vain the unheeded voice
Of fruitless prayer that on the soulless void
Is wasted, reaching not their careless ears !
—As one who, lost in some vast wilderness,
Sinks fainting on the burning sand, and dies
With frantic cry, calling for help in vain
To senseless rocks and wastes of earth and air,
That mock his impotent shrieks and dying moan
With dumb impassive calm,—even such is Man,
Who cries aloud for mercy and for aid
To Nothingness that cannot help or save.

Perplexed perchance with such-like doubts and fears,
Did Perseus and the weeping Nymphs delay

Their last adieus. Again and yet again
He turned him to depart, yet lingered still :
And almost had the horses of the Sun
Scaled the mid arch of morning, ere at last
Regretfully he tore himself away,
Leaping aloft in air, the while he donned
The magic hat, and vanished from their sight.

From noon to eve through skies of cloudless blue
O'er glassy seas he floated : but when night
Cast her dark mantle o'er the watery plain,
A wintry breeze swept sighing from the North,
Wakening the sullen waves, that sobbed and moaned
Like wailing phantoms of the twilight, blown
Homeless about the empty halls of Space.
And through the darkness, like a drifting sail
Torn from the cordage of some labouring bark,
Flew Perseus, westward ever, till, at length,
With early dawn he spied, across his path,
A tumbling stretch of broken waters, white
With seething foam and rush of angry floods,
As though some raging cyclone swept the deep,
Lashing the waves to fury with its scourge,

While all around the narrow belt of storm,
With slow monotonous swell, the leaden waves
Lay sweltering lazily : and yet no gale
Or hurricane aroused the billowy war
Of that fierce current, whose impetuous flow
Was as a turbulent river swelled with floods
Rushing through watery wastes of stagnant calm :
And Perseus knew the mighty Ocean-Streams,
That like the massive edging of a shield
Encircle the broad buckler of the earth :
And joyfully he sped across the waves,
Deeming his tedious journey wellnigh done.
Yet, swiftly though the wingéd sandals flew,
'Twas noon ere Perseus reached the dreary isle
And the dark stream, that from the Unshapen
Land
Flowed heavily, through dank and reedy wilds,
Eastward toward the rushing Ocean-Streams.
And on the margin of the sluggish flood
He laid him down and slept an hour or twain,
Ate of the magic fruit the Nymphs had given,
And rose refreshed, strong in the tireless strength
Of Godlike youth, and that enchanted food.

Broad was the stream and straight,—an easy guide,
And hour by hour did Perseus follow it
Through swampy flats, and dingy moorland wastes,
And rotting pools covered with mantling scum
And greasy ooze, dull-brown or livid green,
Set round with marsh-grass, and harsh growth of
reed,

And rustling flag and bulrush, mildewed o'er
With blighting exhalations, and the breath
Of foul miasma, and chill ague-damps,
That from the fen steamed upwards to the sky,
Veiling the sun in thick malarious mist,
So that his deadened disc shone bleary and dull
With coppery face, like the eclipséd moon.
Utterly waste and lifeless was the land,
The home of Desolation,—desolate
Beyond imagination : beast or bird
Was none, nor any voice of living thing :
Only an iron silence everywhere,
Awful, unbroken since the birth of Time.

And ever as he fled across the wild,
Insensibly the melancholy sun,

Like some red bale-fire, big with pestilence,
Sank weltering down through seas of yellow mist :
And as the stifling air grew chill with eve,
From simmering pools and wastes of seething mud
Dense wreaths of ghostly vapour rose, like smoke
From fires of smouldering weeds, and branches
green

With summer sap,—and, in voluminous folds,
This way and that, swam eddying for a while,
In billowy indistinctness vague and white,
Then slowly settling into shadowy form,—
Like phantoms swathed in charnel vestments,—
rolled

In mad procession onward, one by one,
Athwart the path of Perseus, threatening him
With menacing gesture and uncouth grimace,
Till, mingling with the distance and the fog,
They vanished, driven asunder and dispersed
Like breaking clouds, or in the general haze
Shrouded and lost. Yet ever, as they fled,
Fresh multitudes rose steaming from the ooze,
As rose the arméd hosts from Ares' field,
In after days, when to the Colchian shores,

Adventurous Argo bore her goodly crew,
From Aphetæ and the Minuan realms
Of Tyro's sons, where lofty Pelion towers
Betwixt the blue Ægean, and the bay
That laves the shores of smiling Pagasæ.

But undismayed, with calm and stedfast mind,
Whose balanced strength and perfect equipoise
Recked naught of spectral shapes and shadowy
fears,

Did Perseus, following still the river's course,
Press onward through the silence and the mist,
Until, about the setting of the sun,
The broad flood, slowly dwindling to a stream,
Smaller and smaller grew, and presently
Shrank to a narrow thread of dusky light,
Scarce visible amid the gathering gloom.
Then, on a barren knoll, whose rounded top,
Smooth as an anthill, rose from out the marsh,
Stony and dry and herbless, Perseus lit,
And ate and drank, and laid him down and
slept
The dreamless sleep of healthful weariness.

With earliest morn awakening, on his way
He journeyed to the sources of the stream,
Scarce half a league beyond : and here awhile
He halted, and with anxious scrutiny
Questioned the doubtful twilight, if perchance
His eyes might light on that high table-land
Whereof the Titan told him : yet so dense
Was that dun pall of vapour, and so dim
The struggling light of that uncertain dawn,
That nothing could he see save marsh and haze,
Nor these beyond a bowshot. Everywhere
The fens below, the blinding mists around,
Perplexed his sense, so that he hardly knew
The way whereby he came, and almost lost
The guiding stream which, with long fruitless search,
He sought, and when re-found scarce dared to leave.
And blind confusion, vague and terrible,
As of a frightened child that dreads the dark,
Fell over him, as though the stifling mist
Crept inwards with his breath, benumbing him
Through soul and brain, till all things seemed one
haze
Of clouded comprehension, such as loads

The sense in nightmare visions : and his quest,
His journey, and his sojourn with the Nymphs,
Grew vain and meaningless like idle tales
Of childhood, half-remembered through long years,
Or legends, such as village gossips tell
To wondering hinds beside the Christmas fire.

And now the morning waxed apace : the light
Stronger and stronger grew, yet from the marsh
Denser and denser ever rose the mist :
And still beside the margin of the stream
Stood Perseus, doubtfully, like one half lost,
Revolving dimly in his darkened mind
What it were best to do : when suddenly
Blue-eyed Athené flashed a saving thought
Into his soul, so that he laughed, and sprang
Straight upwards, towering like a rising lark,
Till high above the rolling seas of mist,
Poised in mid air, and motionless, he hung,
As hangs a fleecy wisp of summer cloud
About the peaks of Pindus, when the noon
Lies warm upon Thessalian olive-groves.
And far and wide he scanned the vaporous deep

Till, dimly looming through the mists beneath,
He spied afar the solitary hill
That marked the Gorgons' lair. Then joyfully,
On swifter pinion than the hungry kite
That sights the bittern wheeling as he booms
His unmelodious greeting to the eve,
Forward he rushed,—and through the sullen mist
Far underneath him, faintly outlined, saw
The beetling wall of that vast table-land,
And the long reaches of the upland waste,
Rising above the lower depths of fog,
Like rocks submerged, seen downwards through
the blue

Of slumbering seas : but onward still he sped
Towards the hill, and on the topmost peak
Alighting, paused awhile, and through the haze,
Which brooded here less densely than below,
Gazed warily upon the doleful scene,
If he perchance might spy the Gorgons' cave :
Yet nothing could he see save rocks and fens,
And the dull shimmering of the turbid air.

Then slowly sailing round the mountain-slopes,

Hawk-like on noiseless wing, with diligent eye
Intent on every cairn of ruinous stone,
Huge shapeless boulder, or grey precipice,
He sought the entrance of that loathsome den,
Nor sought in vain: for half way down the steep,
Beneath an overhanging ledge, that frowned
Like the grim eyebrow of some baleful eye,
He came upon a perpendicular rift
Torn in the surface of a limestone crag,
As in rude semblance of a pointed arch:
Whereto a narrow pathway, beaten hard
By oft-repeated tread of mighty feet,
Led sloping upwards from the fens below,
Where the rank marish-grass and bulrushes
Lay torn and flattened in the reeking ooze,
As by the wallowing of monstrous swine:
And where the pathway neared the wallowing-
place
Upon the half-dried surface of the mire
He came on fearful prints of taloned feet,
Like those of huge and hideous birds of prey,
With here and there a glittering brazen scale,
And here and there a loathly dragon-plume,

Large as the oar of some frail fishing skiff
In Cythnos or Seriphos built, that floats
Swan-like upon the fair Myrtoan wave.
And Perseus knew that he had reached at
last

His journey's end, and with a silent prayer
To Hermes and Athené, onward flew
Three bowshots from the entrance of the cave,
And lighting on a crevice in the rocks,
Where he might watch in safety, sat him down
Upon a stone, and waited for the end.

Silent as death lay all the land: the mist
Swam like a furnace in the noonday glare
Of the fierce vertical sun that overhead
Rolled slowly like a ball of ruddy fire
Through windless skies,—and from the noisome fen
The vapours rose in clouds and pillared wreaths
That swept in eldritch dance about the waste,
Thickening the haze: and still within the rift
Sat Perseus like a lion couched to spring,
Counting the tedious moments as they passed,
By the quick pulses of his bounding veins.

At last, from out the cavern's rocky throat,
Came forth a hollow rumbling as of stones
Dislodged by ponderous footfalls, and a din
Of strange discordant voices, harsh and shrill
As screams of vultures battenning on the corse
Of some ill-fated traveller, slain by thirst
In scorching Libyan wastes of arid sand,
What time the Dog-star rises with the sun :
Whereat with cautious glance he scanned the path,
And dimly, through the favouring mist, that veiled
The stony horror of their fateful eyes,
Discerned the outline of three frightful shapes,
That from the cave passed downwards to the marsh,
And laid themselves among the ooze and slept.

Full warily, yet nimbly as a bat
That through the twilight woods on leathern wing
Darts, noiseless as a shadow, Perseus leapt
Into the air aloft, the while he plucked
Bright Herpé from his thigh, and o'er his head
Face downwards held the mirror of the shield,
Until the polished surface of the bronze
Caught the reflection of those monstrous forms

That lay below : and in its shining depths
He saw a sight both strange and horrible.—
Twain of the hags were black and foul as swine,
With brazen claws and plumes of livid bronze,
And in the reeking filth they lay supine,
Snoring, with mouths agape and wings outspread,—
A loathsome spectacle. Apart from these,
Stretched prone, her forehead resting on her arm,
Medusa lay : bright as the rainbow's hues
Her halcyon plumage gleamed with green and
gold,
And tender roseate hues of sunset, mixed
With creamy white, and delicate sapphire-tints
Lovely exceedingly. Her folded wings
Were eyed like peacock's feathers, and her hair
Of wavy gold, unbraided, on the ground
Floated in silken cataracts : yet each tress
Was twined with hissing snakes : her long white
arms
Were fair as Aphrodité's, yet her hands
Were brazen claws, and brass the glittering scales
That clothed the sensuous outline of her flanks
In armour horrid as the panoply

Of Python, hugest of the serpent-race,
That from the slime in old Deucalion's days
Sprang like a pestilence. Unconsciously
She slept a quiet sleep, while overhead
Hung Perseus hovering, like an angry cloud
Within whose womb the pent-up lightning sleeps
Ready to fall: yet still he gazed and gazed,
Awestruck at sight of so much comeliness
So blended and inextricably linked
In strange and dreadful incongruity,
With hideous foulness,—and a subtle sense
Of deep repulsion filled his sickening soul,
And far more fearsome seemed that lovely form
Than all her swinish sisters' ugliness.

Then, softly as a yellowing autumn leaf,
That from the topmost bough of some great oak
Falls fluttering earthwards in November days,
When all the winds are still,—so Perseus fell
Gently adown beside her as she slept,
And gazing on the mirror stedfastly,
Gripped Herpé hard about the jewelled hilt
With no uncertain hand, and high in air

Raising the dull-blue lightning of the blade,
With all his might let fall one fearful stroke,
That shore through iron bone and brazen scale,
More easily than edge of keenest scythe
In harvest-time through slenderest poppy-stem :
And, from the quivering trunk divided clean,
Along the arm the severed head rolled down
At Perseus' feet : and with averted eyes,
Seizing it boldly by the serpent hair,
He thrust it deep into the goatskin bag,
Then sheathed the dripping blade that reeked and
 smoked
With venomous gore, and, quickly turning, sprang
Into the air, and o'er the dismal waste
Fled faster than he ever flew before :
For as the keen edge of the deadly brand,
Falling, unloosed the poisonous serpent-coils
Of her unholy life, Medusa's wings
And brazen claws, convulsed with dying throe,
Clanged hoarsely, clattering like a broken shield ;
Whereat the others, starting from their sleep,
Soon as they saw their sister lying dead,
With horrid screams and howls of frantic rage,

Flung themselves, bellowing, on the bleeding corpse,
So suddenly, that but for Hades' hat,
There had the slayer perished with the slain :
For hardly by a single cubit's length,
Hiding his eyes behind Athené's shield,
Did he elude those vengeful brazen claws,
And, like a midnight ghost at break of dawn,
Sped wildly towards the East on arrowy wing,
Scarce tardier than the viewless speed of Thought.

Meanwhile, right little time in useless plaint
The Gorgons wasted, but, like questing hounds,
With widened nostrils snuffed the tainted breeze,
Slow-wheeling round and round, until at last,
Striking the blood-scent, with a fearful howl,
Forward they rushed in fierce pursuit, and soon
Gained visibly : and Perseus' blood ran cold
As, dimly looming through the mists behind,
Straight in his track he saw them following fast,
And heard the flapping of their monstrous wings
Come whistling shrilly down the stricken air,
That roared and shrieked beneath the strenuous
scourge

Of those wide dragon plumes, whose sail-like span,
Full twenty cubits broad from tip to tip,
Smote the dull air with irresistible force,
Like giant windmill arms,—and Perseus turned
Shuddering, and fled : yet still they neared and
 neared,

With desperate speed, increasing as they flew :
And ever as the breathless moments passed,
Once and again did Perseus turn, and gaze
With blank amazement on the lessening gap
'Twixt him and death : then muttering to himself
He spake, " My doom is sealed ! Yon filthy hags
Are fleetier than the sandals, yet not much ;
And by a very little am I lost.
More speed ! More speed !—Only a little more,—
Two leagues an hour—nay one,—and I were safe,
But now I die. 'Tis hard indeed to lose
So great a stake by such a narrow cast :—
Faster, brave sandals, faster, or I die ! "

Scarce had he spoken, ere the angry scream
Of the wind whistling past him as he flew
Grew louder, rising to a deafening shriek ;

And underneath his feet the phantom fens
Flashed dizzily behind him like a dream ;
And for a moment all his senses reeled,
And all the world became one roaring wind,
As with incredible speed he cleft in twain
The sluggish air that struck and buffeted him
As though he stood on some bare mountain-height,
Facing a hurricane. But soon a yell
Of baffled rage, that down the hissing blast—
Broken and spent against its turbulent stream—
Came shivering, told its welcome tale of hope
In Perseus' ear : and though his labouring breath
Came thick in panting gasps, and like a lash,
The blind air, meeting, stung him in the face,
He laughed aloud for joy when from the mist,
Emerging like a flash, beneath his feet
The mighty Streams of Ocean came and passed,—
And underneath him smiled the summer sea,
And overhead the cloudless dome of blue.

Out of the misty silence, like a soul
That, waking from the fathomless abyss
Of death or deathlike dream, dawns into life,

Wildered and lost in half-unconsciousness,—
Or like a meteor from the utmost depths
Of interstellar darkness, when the sweep
Of its vast cyclic revolution draws
Its wandering path across the golden fields
Of sunlight and the life of Phœbus' smile,—
So Perseus sped into the laughing day :
And close behind him, like twin harbingers
Of imminent doom, seen in the mystic glass
Of some prophetic soul, whose lucid depths
Reflect the bodiless forms of things to be,
Long ere their substance looms from out the void,
The spectral shadows of the sister fiends
Shot lengthening out obliquely in the rays
Of the slow-westerling sun, with hungry claws
Outstretched to clutch, and at his very heels
Fell, darkly lowering, on the tranquil deep.

Now, at this time, upon the mountain-peak,
Ægle with Atlas sat, and o'er the waves
Afar to westward bent her wistful gaze,
The while with cunning question deftly framed,
She lured the lordly Titan to discourse

Of elder ages ere the Gods were born,
Of his own youth, his manhood, and his might,
His worship and his state in Cronos' days,
And all the glory of the olden time.
And Atlas, sadly smiling, answered her,
Idly at first, as one that tells a tale
Of childhood to a child, but, as he spake,
Kindling to fervour and fierce eloquence,
Like some old warrior fighting o'er again
The battles of his youth, whose frozen blood
Fires as he babbles of contested fields,
Fierce charges, and the shock of thundering hosts
Closing in deadly grapple, and the flash
Of the swift sword-stroke shattering on the helm,
Till, as he speaks, his thin and quavering voice
Grows mellow and sonorous, and the light
Of combat flashes from his age-dimmed eye,
And from his chair beside the ingle-nook
He starts erect with listening ears intent,
As though from out the years he heard once more
The long-forgotten trump of battle bray.

"Ay," quoth the Titan, "those were golden days,

And golden were the Gods that ordered them,
As fair and just as these be false and foul,
Lovers of men, benignant, merciful,
Not in name only, but in very deed :
And great and goodly was my part therein,
My part and thine, Prometheus, we who now
Of all men living are most miserable,
Tortured, oppressed, despoiled. Oh ! Destiny,
How long shall we be trampled under foot ?
Is there no hope, no help ?—Ay, we were great
And happy once, poor brother, thou and I,
To whom the very name of happiness
Is now but empty mockery. Woe is me !
How evanescent, frail, and fugitive
Is Man and Man's prosperity,—a gleam
Of transient lightning,—a pale meteor spark
Gulfed in the black abyss ! Yea, even the Gods
Last but one moment longer : each alike,
Pale phantoms of the silence and the void,
Strayed into being, are born and change and pass
Back to the silence and the void once more,
Like dreams forgotten,—raindrops on the deep
Of infinite Time,—white flakes of bursting foam

Hurled down the roaring hurricane, whose sweep
Goads into storm through all their seething depths
The weltering waters of Eternity.

“ High was my state aforetime, wide my rule,
And fair my dwelling. Dost remember, sweet,
The pile I reared me in the Caucasus,
Hard by the flowery margin of a lake,
Among green woodlands, where the summer breeze
Dallies the whole year long through flower and leaf,
Softly as Aphrodité’s perfumed breath
Among the lovelocks round Adonis’ brows?—
My stately mansion with its hundred halls
Of snow-white marble roofed with gleaming gold,
Its hundred pillars carved of porphyry,
Its gates of woven bronze, its gardens fair
With feathery fountains and sequestered bowers,
Melodious once with voice of lutes and birds
Melting to liquid music,—silent now,
Ruined and desolate. ’Twas like thine own,
Save for those porphyry shafts, yet huger far,
Of giant architecture, as beseemed
A Titan’s dwelling-place.—Alas, alas !

How blithely, with how fair a retinue,
And with what jocund sound of dance and song,
What shouts of warriors and sweet minstrelsy
Of Wood-Nymphs and the merry country-folk,
I crossed the gilded threshold on that morn
When Cronos bade me join the Titan host
On Othrys,—knowing not that never more
The brazen gate swung backwards on its hinge
Should open to my summons as of old.—
Yet once again they brought me to my home ;
They burned my orchards and my barns with
 fire,
They spoiled me of my wealth and slew my folk,
They rent my roof-tree down before mine eyes,
They brayed the sculptured walls with battering-
 rams,
And in one roaring hell of ravenous flame,
With hideous crash the blackened fabric fell :—
I saw it all dismembered, stone from stone,
While I, at once its builder and its lord,
Lay bound and helpless, impotent to save.—
How now, sweet child ? 'Tis but an ancient tale
Of wrong and ruin. Wherefore weepest thou ? ”

“O Atlas,” answered Ægle mournfully,
“I weep not for the woes of perished years,
For none can alter or recall the past,
How grey soe’er it be with grief and change :
But rather for the future do I weep,
Whose sunless dawn, before mine inward eye
Ghostlike uprising from the realms of Night,
Looms red with menace of impending storm :—
For when I tarried with Persephoné,
Hard by a lake upon a flowery shore
Where sunwinds breathe through murmurous
glades, I saw
Another palace fashioned like to thine,
With columns hewn of blood-red porphyry :
Whereat I marvelled greatly, questioning
The sombre Queen,—and thus she made reply,
‘Even as each man buildeth for himself,
So build they for him in Elysium.’”

“Ha ! in Elysium saidst thou ? Nay, my child,
It cannot be ! Surely it cannot be !
For Atlas is accurséd of the Gods,
How then shall he have portion with the Blest ?—

And yet—and yet,—Mysterious Destiny!—
Dread Power that sittest at the heart of things,
Veiled and alone, in awful majesty
Of Darkness and of Silence infinite,
Weaving the troublous warp and weft of Chance
With shuttle of Hope and tangled threads of Fear,
Spun darkly from the distaff of pale dreams
Of gossamer wools shorn from the sombre fleece
Of those grey flocks that on the ghostly hills
And shadowy plains of dim Futurity,
For ever unbeheld of mortal eye,
Wander unseen, like phantom clouds adrift
Upon the starless space 'twixt world and world,—
Is this thy recompense for countless years
Of unimagined anguish, such as ne'er
Omnipotent malignity contrived,
Or helpless Man endured?—Eternal rest!
Unbroken peace, sweet sleep and happy days,
Sweet rest from labour, long surcease of pain!—
Can these indeed be mine? 'Tis past belief:—
I hardly dare to hope it may be true:—
For hope unmans the soul whose fixed resolve
Is braced to suffer all. 'Twere ill to trust

The flattering whisper of a traitorous hope,
That lures and cozens, only to destroy
The cheated soul more foully.—Lo, then, thus
I thrust it from me! Ægle, sweetest niece,
If ever thou didst count old Atlas dear,
I pray thee fool me not with idle hopes,
For well I deem my destined dwelling-place
Is not Elysium, but Tartarus,
As otherwise, I trow, thou wouldst not weep.
Yet, howsoever sore my punishment
And dark my doom in Hades' prison-house,
One sorry crumb of comfort still remains,
Since heavier than this it cannot be.—
And in the wreck and ruin of all things else
Still have I one ally,—a mighty King
Of world-wide rule, whom mortals call Despair,—
Despair that, hoping nothing, fears not aught,
And with a mocking laugh of careless scorn
Flings back its challenge in the torturer's face,
Stronger to dare, to suffer and to die,
Than all his malice to inflict : and thus,
With the high courage of a Titan's soul,
Steeled, petrified, and buttressed by despair

To adamantine purpose fixed as fate,
In life or death will Atlas face his doom,
Dauntless, and in defeat still unsubdued."

"Nay, Atlas," cried the Nymph, "I fool thee not!
How should I dare to trifle with thy woes,
Thou kingly sufferer, or beguile thy soul
With the fond phantom of an empty hope?
Too well I know thee, O thou Godlike one,
Strongest alike and gentlest of thy race,
Most honoured, best beloved, father and friend,
O dearer far than these weak words of mine
May ever hope to tell!—too well I know
The lofty strength of that imperious will,
To deem that thou wouldst shrink in coward fear
From any destiny, how harsh soe'er,
Or howso harshly told. 'Twere not for me
To cloke from thee, thou tower of fortitude,
The naked truth, or strive to hide the face
Of frowning fate with any specious veil!
Not for the strong are speeches surface-sweet,
The thin disguises of a grievous tale:
They need not to be tickled, like a girl,

With sugared phrases pleasant to the ear,
Or comforted with fables like a child :
For on their sense the speech of utter Truth
Falls ever gratefulest, how hard soe'er
And graceless be the message of her mouth.
Thus ever, heart to heart, and eye to eye,
Thy speech the perfect reflex of thy thought,
Hast thou, O Atlas, schooled these lips to speak
Soothfastness absolute to friend and foe,
Exaggerating naught, concealing naught ;—
And thus, and thus alone, I spake but now.
Not otherwhere than in Elysium
They build for thee :—I swear it by the Styx.
Yet, none the less, my heart is nigh to break.
Oh woe is me for thee, father and lord !—
Is it not sorrow enough that thou must die ?”

“ Sorrow !” the Titan answered, “ nay, not so ;
What anxious woman-watcher on the shore
Sorrows to see the storm-tormented bark,
Whose riven sail bears all she loves on earth
Back to the warm white haven of her breast
Through gates of watery death, glide safely on

Past the last treacherous point of sunken rock
That bars the perilous entrance of the port,
And, dove-like, fold once more its weary wings
I' the quiet bay? What helpless wanderer
Through unknown ways of darkness and of fear
Sorrows to see the pale grey tints of dawn
Blushing to faintest hues of dreamy rose,
Where Eos' swift-ascending footsteps mount
The rainbow steeps of Morn? What tortured slave,
Groaning in chains of direst servitude,
Sorrows to see the sword of Freedom raised
To smite his bonds in sunder?—Sorrow not :
Cloud not this happy hour with rain of tears,
But rather laugh aloud and dance for joy :
Bring hither lute and pipe, and wine and flowers,
Wreath all thy brows with roses, and thy lips
With sunniest smiles, for lo ! the Fates are kind,
And Atlas, that was dead, is born again
Under a fairer star : for Hope is life,
And in the life of Hope doth Atlas live !
Oh ! I could leap and sing and shout for joy,
I that was dumb and dead these thousand years !—
I tell thee Atlas is alive once more !

He breathes and hears and sees, and from his limbs
Casts off the fetters of his frozen sleep,
And feels once more the gladness of the sun
Strike through the darkness of his deadly dream,
Like meteor Hope scaring the blind abyss
Of nethermost Despair.—O Destiny,
Atlas the Titan owns thee just and kind,
For thou hast given him hope more sweet than life
To one thrice dead !—Once more the air is sweet
With balmy winds and odorous scents of flowers :
Once more, oh ! yet once more to these sad eyes
The broad blue sea shines like a flawless gem,
And earth is beautiful and heaven is fair.—
Iou ! My heart is like to burst for joy !

“ Ho ! Mother Destiny, to thee I pour
This rich libation of unmingled wine,
Poor recompense for such a mighty boon
As thou hast granted,—yet the giver’s all,
His one possession, gladly dedicate
To thy high worship !—Take thou it and him,
His thanks, his life, his all ! And as the wine,
Born of the earth, returneth to the earth,

Even so let this my being, born of thee,
To thee return again. Receive my soul,
Dread Queen of Gods and men, for I am thine !”

So saying, the Titan filled a brimming cup
Of sparkling must, and on the frozen ground,
Bowing his head in lowly reverence, poured
The generous flood : and as the thirsty soil
Drank in the purple draught, a silence fell
Afar on land and sea, and every wind
Was hush'd, and o'er the barren mountain-top
Suspended hung a little golden cloud,
Rose-flecked with rubies of the sinking sun.

Alone together there, 'twixt earth and sky,
With their own thoughts, the Titan and the Nymph
In silence watched the magic sunset-land
Aglow with seas of beryl and amber isles
Translucent, softly swathed in moony mist,
Whose vaporous bays and dreamy mountain-heights
Changed ever with the ever-changing light,
As through the sapphire spaces of the West,
Down the clear heavens, the cloudless day declined.

And slowly, like the passage of a dream,
The lazy dial-shadow of the peak
Crept eastwards, lengthening ever as it moved
Outwards across the valleys to the sea.

And now the air grew keen with frost : the dews,
Whitening to rime, fell thickly, and the wind
Of twilight rising sighed among the crags
In desolate undertones : and from the gates
Of Darkness, shaking loose their shadowy manes,
Night's raven coursers neighed,—when suddenly
The Titan, starting from his reverie,
As though some strange and unexpected sight
Had snapped the thread of his abstracted mood,
Peered anxiously into the dazzling glow
Where low against the horizon burned the sun :
And presently he spake in measured tones,
Pointing to westward with his mighty hand :
“Seest thou those two black specks above the sun,
No larger than the fretful gnat that skims
At evenfall above some forest pool ?
What thinkest thou these be ?” Whereto the
Nymph,

Shading her forehead with her hand, replied,
"Twain albatrosses wandering from the South,
That ere the fall of darkness seek the shore."

"No albatrosses these," the Titan cried,
"Nor soaring gulls a league or twain to sea,
But giant forms full twenty leagues away,
Borne hitherwards on wings of whirlwind speed,
Far swifter than the eagle's. Think again."

Whereto the Nymph,—still gazing curiously
Upon the specks, that now with furious flight
Nearing the isle, loomed large like spectral bats,—
Made answer, "Nay, I know not what they be,
Unless,—but that were hardly possible,
Seeing indeed to-day is but the third
Since Perseus went his way in quest of them,—
The Gorgons——"

"Now thou hast it," Atlas cried;
"The Gorgons! aye, the Gorgons!—And behold
There are but twain. Where, think'st thou, is the
third?"

And wherefore rush they on such frantic wing

Towards Hesperis?—and in pursuit of what?—
Small need, I trow, to question overmuch,
Knowing that thou knowest.—Yet if thou wouldst
see

The end of such a chase as never yet
Was seen of Gods or men, I charge thee watch,
As doth the umpire of a chariot-race
When twain close-matched are hurrying to the goal
Through clouds of whirling dust. By Cronos' beard!
How fast the hags are nearing! Lo you now,
With what impetuous strokes their dragon-wings
Fall, buffeting to shreds the shrieking air!—
I would I knew what start their quarry hath.
Surely he leads the chase! It cannot be
These hell-hounds have o'errun the scent.—No, no :
It cannot be!—and yet, I would I knew.
'Tis well for him he hath the magic hat,
Though somewhat doth it spoil the spectacle.
—Well flown, ye ugly beldames! Oh, well flown!—
What ho there, Perseus! Art in front of them?
Dost hear me, son of Danae?—Answer not,
I charge thee on thy life, nor pause, but flee
Straight hitherwards, across the boundary.

There art thou safe : they dare not follow thee,
The poisonous harridans !—Ho ! 'tis a game
For Gods and heroes ! By the sacred head
Of my great sire Iapetus, I swear,
If thou hast slain Medusa and hast escaped,
Thou hast a lion's courage, a giant's might,
A serpent's subtlety. I count this deed
Thrice happy, and the doer thereof thrice blest :
And fain were I to have some part therein
More worthy of a Titan warrior's fame
Than this,—to stand aside, and, like a girl,
Look idly on, while one I fain would save
Casts dice with death unholpen. Woe is me !
This is indeed my crowning ignominy !
Oh ! for one hour of freedom,—one short hour,
To whelm those hags beneath a thousand rocks,
Then die, and be at peace for evermore !—
O Destiny,—for unto thee alone,
Thou first and last of Powers, will Atlas pray,—
Grant me some portion in this glorious deed :
Aid me this once—once only !—

Idiot ! Fool !—

Surely I grow as senseless as these crags

Whereon I kneel.—Yon mass of jagged rock,
Could I but reach and tear it from its place,
Were no unworthy message to these fiends
From one whose arm aforetime strove with Gods
And tasked their utmost might.—It stirs! It
yields!—

'Tis loose!—Look to yourselves ye hounds of Hell!”

So saying, the Titan with his huge right hand
Tore at the rock, and, loosening, lifted it
As hurlers lift a quoit, and with one heave
Of his tremendous forearm launched it forth,
Whizzing as from a catapult. Awhile,
Measuring the distance o'er with anxious eye,
He watched the ponderous missile cleave its path
Through the rent air,—then laughed till every crag
Shook with Titanic mirth, and cried aloud,
“Ho! ho! My goblet to an acorn shell
The game is lost and won! My cast hath thrown
Three sixes!—Yon small pebble hath stayed the
chase!”

Even as he spake these words, the hurtling rock

Crashed full against the foremost Gorgon's side :
And with one hideous shriek,—that o'er the deep
Came wandering like the cry of some lost sprite
To Atlas' crag,—the stricken monster fell
Into the sea, and sank beneath the waves.

Thereat her sister stayed,—and as she rose,
Yelling for succour, caught her by the hair,
And from the reddened waters dragged her forth,
Bleeding and maimed : one loathly dragon-wing,
Hard by the shoulder broken, downward trailed,
Furrowing the placid surface of the deep
With nerveless tip. Vainly awhile she strove,
With frantic flapping, to retake the air,
But ever as she rose sank screaming back,
Helplessly clutching at her sister's hand ;
Who, after many a futile effort, stooped,
And o'er each sinewy shoulder gently drew
One languid claw,—for even in evil things
Some trace of brute affection for their kind
Oft lingers still,—then lifting, seated her
Upon her back, and with slow labouring flight
Retreating, vanished in the gathering gloom.

“Haste thee!” cried Atlas to the Nymph; “depart,
Lest night o’ertake thee ere thou reach the plain :
And when thou seest Perseus, say to him,
‘Greeting from Atlas! Thou hast played the man
This day, and worthily hast thou redeemed
Thy pledge to Polydectes. So do thou
To Atlas also. By thy plighted word,
And by the oath thou swarest unto me,
I charge thee come thou hither with the morn,
And bring that gift which thou didst promise me.’ ”

BOOK VIII.

HOW ATLAS HAD REST FROM HIS LABOURS.

THE murmurous hush of sleeping woods at eve ;—
The plash of tinkling streams beneath the moon
In forest valleys, where far mountain-heights
Fade softly into dreamy distances
Through the wide silence of the summer dark,
Warm as the kiss of Love, yet infinite
As Death's, dream-haunted, odorous with the scent
Of many a flower unseen, whose subtle breath
Inspires with lingering sweets the drowsy air ;—
Umbrageous spaces of the populous woods,
Through which, as through some bower of woven
 dreams,
The Ariel-Spirit of the moonbeams steeps

With changing fugitive gleams of shimmering
white

The tenebrous vistas, blank and meaningless,
Deserted by the laughing Spirit of Day,
And vacuous as the interstellar void,
Till by the pale mysterious Spirit of Night
Possessed instead,—refined and spiritualized
In outline, colour, light, and shadow-play,
To other meanings, like some well-known face
By sorrow or high aspiration touched
To finer issues ;—lakes of silvery calm
In ghostlier lakes of tremulous moonlight bathed ;—
How fair they are and strange, how passing strange,
These sights and sounds of that dim world that
wakes

When Man and all his trouble are sunk to sleep !

On nights like these,—in this our sunless clime
Of cloud and rain and melancholy mist
So seldom seen, though lovelier far than rare,
But in the changeless skies of Hesperis
The whole year round alike continuous,—
The sister Nymphs, together or apart,

Were oft-times wont to roam : nor was the face
Of hill or valley, copse or garden-land,
To them familiar less by night than day.
And if one journeyed to the mountain-peak
To talk awhile with Atlas, and abode
Till sundown, 'twas the custom of the twain,
Soon as their rites beside the sacred tree
In order due were ended, to repair
Unto a little flowery forest vale
Hard by the mountain-flank, and there await
Their sister's coming in an arbour, twined
Of myrtle-boughs, whereby the pathway ran.

And so it chanced, that, on this very eve,
When Ægle, hastening down the rugged steep,
Two hours or more past moonrise, reached the foot,
There Arethusa and Hesperia
Sat waiting for her in the myrtle-bower,
To whom she turned with eager questioning :—
“ Have ye seen Perseus ?—Hath he slain the hag ?—
How goes it with him ?—Is he whole and safe ?—
Surely naught evil hath befallen him !
Yet wherefore comes he not along with you ?—
Speak, I conjure ye, speak ! ”—Whereto the twain

Made answer, "Nothing have we seen or heard,
Save Atlas' voice, like thunder, from the crag,
Shouting we knew not what : though verily
At first we deemed he called us : but at last,
Or so it seemed, he laughed aloud for mirth,
As at some merry jest or goodly sight
That hugely tickled him. Yet, of a truth,
So dense is this same arbour, and so high
Yon intervening ridge that bars the sound,
We are not certain if we heard aright."

"How say ye, sisters?" cried the eldest Nymph ;
"Have ye then tarried here since set of sun?"
Whereto they thus replied, "An hour or twain
Ere sunset did we leave the palace gates,
Whence leisurely we wandered hitherwards
To meet thee. Three long hours have we been
here,
From rise to setting of our father's star,
And while we waited for thee, to beguile
The slow-winged moments, talked of many things,—
Of Perseus, and of Atlas, and of thee ;
Of what thou sawest in the Shades below,

And of that palace in Elysium
Whereof thou toldest us, much questioning
The meaning of this portent : and, at times,
We gathered flowers, and, singing as we wove,
Plaited these coronals, or stayed our talk
To watch the sunset fade behind the hill,
And the slow brightening of Selené's orb
From nebulous white to gleaming silver-sheen,
Which now, half-way towards the zenith, hangs
High on the middle archway of the East.
Nor know we anything of what hath chanced ;
Thou therefore speak, that we may list and learn."

" Arise," she answered, " let us hasten home :
And on the way will I unfold to you
That which befell upon the mountain-top ;
For though by reason of the magic hat
We saw not aught of him, yet am I sure
That Perseus is already in this isle,
And fain were I to see him face to face,
And hearken to the tale he hath to tell,
Which should be marvellous : for, of a truth,
I doubt not he hath won the Gorgon's head."

“Why, this were goodly news!” the twain replied.
“And yet bethink thee,—Is it possible
That even Perseus,—though indeed he wear
The wingéd sandals, which, as Atlas saith,
Of all things else on earth be speediest,—
Could in so scant a time as three short days
Both find and slay the Gorgon and return?
Yet, forasmuch as we are well assured
Thou speakest not without some weighty cause,
Let us depart forthwith : and as we go,
Do thou declare the reason of thy thought.”

“That will I joyfully,” the Nymph replied :
And thereupon she told them all the tale
Of that strange chase and of the end thereof ;
Of Atlas and the part he played therein ;
And lastly of the message that she bare
To Perseus from the Titan. And one said,
“What is this gift that Perseus promised him?”
“I know not :” answered Ægle mournfully,—
“I know not, O my sisters : but I fear
It is none other save that last dread gift
Which Atlas seeks and all men else eschew.”

Conversing thus together, as they trod
The moonlit tangles of the forest path,
Quickly they gained the garden, and began
To call aloud on Perseus, but no voice
Answering, they passed within the brazen gates,
Still calling, "Perseus!" "Perseus! show thyself!"
"Perseus, where art thou?"—till the silent halls
Waxed musical with echoes, not less sweet
Than those that, falling erst on Hades' ear,
Won back from death the lost Eurydice.
Yet still no answering voice replied: and soon
All lingering hope had faded, and instead,
A leaden presage of disaster weighed
Upon their troubled breasts, and silently,
Reluctant each to shape her fears in words,
With straining eyes, and faces deadly pale,
They roamed from hall to hall like those who seek
Dead faces in the darkness: and at last,
Alone within the star-ceiled Hall of Ge,
The slow tears coursing down her lovely cheeks,
Stood Ægle, casting her despairing eyes
Upon the couch where, but three nights ago,
Perseus had slept,—when lo! what sight was there

That to her heart brought back the genial tide
Of hope, and from her stifled bosom thrust
The nightmare grief that choked and strangled
her?—

Yet was it vision or reality?—

For there upon the bed the hero lay,
And on the floor beside him lay the shield,
The sword, the sandals, and the goatskin bag,
No longer empty. Fast asleep he lay,
Slumbering as soundly as a weary child :
And cautiously she stole towards the couch,
And on his smooth white forehead gently pressed
The faultless roses of her lips.—Oh joy !
No phantom wraith of unsubstantial air
Mocked her caress:—'twas he in very deed.
Whereat a sudden sense of virgin shame,
That sent the warm blood mantling to her cheeks,
Shot through her soul, and straightway from the
couch
With noiseless steps she turned, and left the hall.

And blithely to her sisters she returned,
Saying, " Perseus sleeps within the Hall of Ge ! "

Whereto they answered, still incredulous,
" Alas ! it is his ghost : for oftentimes
Pale visions, wandering from the underworld,
Clothed in the visible semblance that they wore
Aforetime in the flesh, return to earth,
Haunting the scenes of former happiness :
And surely he was happy in this isle,
Where first he learned the magic lore of song ! "
And Ægle, smiling, answered, " Go and see.
No phantom is it, but a sleeping man,
Who this same day hath run a wilder race
Than man e'er ran before, and now lies there
Worn out with toil and desperate weariness :
And ye may mark his bosom's rise and fall,
The quivering of his nostrils, and the sound
Of his low breathing, faint yet audible,—
Yea, touch him if ye list, as I have done :—
Yet wake him not. He hath much need of rest,
And we must climb the mountain with the morn."

She ended : and with light unsandalled feet,
Whose airy footsteps, soft as falling snow,
Fell soundless on the richly-paven floor,

The other twain arose, and cautiously
Crept from the hall,—but soon returning, came
And sat them down by Ægle joyfully,
Whispering, “ ’Tis he, indeed, but sound asleep :
For we both saw and touched him, and are sure
This is no phantom, but his very self,
Alive and scatheless : and we also know
That he hath slain the Gorgon : for the bag
Is heavy, and the sword-blade stained with blood :
For when we drew it gently from the sheath,
Lo ! from the point great drops of poisonous gore,
Black as the brewage of a witch’s vat,
Ran trickling down, and on the ebon floor
Hissed as they lighted, and, like writhing snakes,
Upreared their threatening heads in act to strike,
Which quickly, with low-muttered charms, we slew.”

Then all the Nymphs embraced and wept for joy,
Gave thanks to Ge, to Hermes, and to Zeus,
And most of all to that fair Warrior-Maid,
Blue-eyed Athené, by whose help and grace
This perilous adventure had been brought
To happy issue : and with thankful hearts,

Whence every shade of dark solicitude
Soon vanished in the light of happy dreams,
They sank to sleep on that eventful eve.

The sun was high in heaven when Perseus woke,
And wide and blue shone forth the cloudless morn,
As, in the splendour of his God-like youth
Clad round about, as in some costly robe,
He strode into the hall of tapestry,
Where, standing near a table richly decked
In festive wise with rarest fruits and flowers,
Wines of ambrosial perfume, richest cakes,
And golden cells of amber honeycomb,
The three fair sister Nymphs awaited him,
With downcast eyes, and delicate cheeks suffused
With tenderest rosy flush, as all, in turn,
Kissed and embraced him, on his broad bare breast
Pillowing their flowerlike heads a moment's space,
Then starting back like frightened fawns, aghast
At their own boldness, and the ardent flame
That thrilled them at the clasp of those strong arms.
Thus laughing, weeping, timid, daring, shy,—
Now coy, now yielding, wholly beautiful,—

At once half-sisterly, half-loverlike,—
They clustered round about him with an air
Of admiration and proud ownership,
As though some subtle sense of property
In him and in his mighty deeds possessed
Each fluttering woman-heart ; but most of all
The liquid love-light burned in Ægle's eyes.

And, while they feasted, Perseus told his tale :
And breathlessly they hung upon his words,
As, simply, with unconscious eloquence,
He limned each several detail in the chain
Of desperate adventure, from the hour
When first he parted from them on the isle,
To the last moments of that fearful chase,
Which thus he sketched, with vivid portraiture :

“ Hard pressed, yet gaining slowly, more and more,
A little while ere sunset I espied
The isle, which, like a dazzling emerald gleam,
Flashed into sight above the broad blue deep :
And thither, as an arrow towards the mark
When some strong archer's nervous arm has loosed

The straining arc, I winged my headlong flight :
And almost did I deem myself secure,
Though not beyond the reach of accident,
When suddenly there chanced a wondrous thing
Which raised my dawning hopes to certitude.
For from the crag there came a muffled roar
As of an earthquake, and I heard my name
Shouted in vast sonorous thunder-tones,
By whose tremendous volume of deep sound
The shivering air seemed rent and shocked, and
drave

Seawards, in myriad waves of broken sound :
As when,—what time the late extinguished moon,
Unseen, begins again her mensual round,—
The flood-tide, rising in one monstrous wave,
Bursts on some jagged ridge of broken reef
Left naked by the ebb, and, weltering past,
Rent into fragmentary billows, seethes
With growl and swirl far up the shelving shore :—
Whereat I raised my eyes, and, wondering, saw
Atlas, with one huge arm drawn back to hurl
A ponderous fragment of the living rock,
Which, at that instant parting from his hand,

Flew, shrilly screaming, far above my head
Leagues further out behind me : and I turned,
Still fleeing shorewards for my life, and lo !
I saw it graze the foremost Gorgon's side,
Who—like a swan that, on exultant wing
Swift-sailing homewards o'er the darkening fens,
Full on his breast receives the deadly stone
Flung by some Balearic slinger—turned
Straight over in the air, and, fluttering, sank,
With hideous yell, headforemost in the waves.

“Straightway the chase was stayed,—when quietly
I flitted onwards unpursued, and soon
Hard by the palace gates alighting, found
The place deserted, and, being weary, cast
My limbs upon the couch, and slept till morn.

“ And, as I slept, Athené came to me,
Saying, ‘ Well done, O son of mine own sire !
Well hast thou dared, and well hast thou withstood :
For of a truth I am not ignorant
How great and fair a bribe was offered thee
To quit this quest, which thou, with steadfast mind,

Still heedful of thy promise, didst reject.
And well is it for thee that so thou didst,
Else hadst thou paid the forfeit with thy life.
For but this very morn I talked with Zeus,
And thus he spake : " Not by one single hour
Is Perseus overhasty : for the hags,
Stung by some vague premonitory sense
Of threatening danger, even now prepare,
No later than to-morrow morn, to quit
Their ancient well-accustomed haunts, and seek
Safety and refuge in the outer night
That lies beyond the limits of the world."
Therefore, if thou hadst loitered on thy road,
Thou hadst not found them : and from this same
quest

Thou couldst not wholly turn aside, for Fate
Is stronger than all might of Gods or men,
And she had scourged thee hence, or soon or late,
Unto thy death in the Unshapen Land.
And now behold, at Hesperus' request,
Who grieveth for his daughters' loneliness,
That very boon which thou didst late forego
Is granted to thee : and in pledge thereof,

Lo, when thou next awakest, thou shalt find
The shield, the hat, the wallet, and the sword
Lying as thou didst leave them by thy couch,
But for the sandals shalt thou seek in vain,
And thou shalt tarry in this happy isle
Till I myself shall bring them back to thee.—
The time is long. Take thou thine ease therein :
For even Olympus holds no higher bliss
Than that which now is given thee. Fare thee well !'

“ So spake the Maid, and, smiling graciously,
Dissolved upon the darkness, and I slept.
Yet, when I woke, the sandals were not there,
Though still the wallet with the Gorgon's head,
The hat, the sword, and fair Athené's shield
Remain untouched, each in its several place.
Whereby I know it was no idle dream,
Such as with self-engendered phantasies
Beguiles the wilfully deluded sense,
That for its secret inclinations finds
Divine endorsement and authority
In visions born of its own consciousness,—
Fallacious revelations, whence it draws

Such inferences as itself approves :
As do the priests, whose vain fantastic minds
Run riot in their own imaginings,
Until, puffed up with pride, they deem themselves
Inspired interpreters of things divine,
Upon the credulous vulgar palming off
Their ravings as the oracles of Zeus."

"O Perseus," faltered Ægle, brokenly,
"The Gods are gracious unto whom they love,
And thou and we find favour in this hour !
For in the midst of all our happiness,
Our pride in thee and thy great victory,
The shadow of impending parting weighed
Upon our burdened spirits like a stone
By careless children flung in wanton sport
Upon a fragile lily, whose pale eyes
Have but beheld the sunshine for a day
Ere, crushed beneath a dull and senseless load,
They close despairingly in living death.
And though we strove to thrust our grief aside
Lest it should cloud the brightness of thy sky,
Our smiles were nigh to weeping, and our hearts

Like victims decked with flowers for sacrifice.
But now,—Oh! verily the Gods are good,
And all my soul is drowned in happiness!"

No further could she speak for tears of joy :
But Arethusa, rising, caught a lute,
Whose trembling strings she touched with practised
hand
To some wild strain of rapturous melody,
As thus she chanted with Hesperia :

ARETHUSA.

O Light of Life! O deathless Spirit of Beauty!
My soul beneath thy starry influence yearns,
Like some pale glowworm 'neath the Star of Even
Exulting;—I the glowworm, thou the star!

HESPERIA.

O Light of Love! O sunlit soul of Morning!
My spirit soars towards thee like the lark
When Eos wreathes the East in rosy garlands
Gold-dusted;—I the lark, and thou the dawn!

ARETHUSA.

O lustrous moon of Hope ! O silvery splendour !
My soul rejoices in thee as the earth
In the wild radiance of the pearly crescent
New-rising ;—I the earth, and thou the moon !

HESPERIA.

O Light of Joy ! O cloudless noon of laughter !
Upon thine eyes my spirit turns her eyes,
As doth the sunflower in the sunlight golden
Expanding ;—I the sunflower, thou the sun !

They ceased : and Ægle filled a golden bowl
With rarest wine, and crowned the wine with flowers,
To Hermes and Athené and to Zeus
Pouring libations with thank-offering due :
Which rites being ended, thus she spake again,
Smiling through tears : “O Perseus, well-beloved
Both of the Gods and also of ourselves,
Wellnigh had I forgotten, in my joy
At these so happy tidings, to repeat
That message which the Titan yestereve
Confided to me, straitly charging me,

The moment that I saw thy face, to say :
'Greeting from Atlas ! Thou hast played the man
And worthily redeemed thy plighted word
Unto thy foe. So do thou also now
To me thy friend : for by thy sacred oath
I charge thee come thou hither with the morn,
And with thee bring that gift which is my due,
According to the pact I made with thee.' "

And Perseus, shuddering, answered, " Be it so :
That which I swear to do will I perform,
Though truly 'tis a task that likes me ill,—
So ill, indeed, that could the sacrifice
Of all my new-won honour and renown
Avail to break this compact and annul
The causes wherefore Atlas holds thereto,
I would not deem the price too dear to pay.
For of all others of the sons of men
Whom it hath ever been my lot to know,
I count the Titan prince and chief of all,—
Alike the shrewdest and the merriest,
Wisest of counsel, weightiest of deed,
Most chivalrous, most gentle, and most strong."

“Nobly thou judgest of him!” cried the Nymphs :
“Such was indeed the Atlas of our youth,
Whose praise was in all mouths of Gods and men,
In heaven and earth : nor was he rated then
Less worthy than thou now accountest him.
For all men spake of Atlas as of one
Strongest alike and kindest of men,
Whose strength weighed ever in the scale of Right :
Faithful to friends, to foes most terrible,
Yet to the vanquished ever merciful :
Wise as a God, yet courteous even to fools :
Of purpose ever steadfast, yet withal
No tyrant, harsh in action and in word,
But sunny-tempered as an August noon :
Of honour ever finely scrupulous :
Of morals continent though not austere :
Keen witted without malice,—not averse
To dance or feast or temperate carouse,
Bright eyes, and loving looks, and rosy lips,
Choice wines, rich dainties, curious things and rare,
Such as the scholar and the artist love,
Yet simple in his chaste magnificence :
Unselfish, generous, guileless as a child,

Though deep and cunning when he dealt with
knaves.

Thus did he show to all the world alike,
Both friends and foes : but specially to us,
Of whom the eldest then was but a child,
He was our partner, playmate, friend and guide,
Our second father, tenderer than our own,
Indulgent, ever patient, ever kind ;
Nor yet,—though Cronos' chiefest counsellor,—
So occupied with grave affairs of rule
As not to steal full many a lighter hour
Wherein to join our sports, and romp and play
With us, who were but little prattling babes ;
Or,—wrapping wisdom up in parable,—
Teach us strange secrets of the heavens and earth,
And how to read the writings of the Fates,
And search the hidden thoughts of Gods and men,
Discerning good from ill, and false from true,
By other standards than fair looks and words.—
Such was he, then, when great and prosperous,
Courtèd and praised and loved by Gods and men.
But now, alone, accurséd of the Gods,
Without one solace, and without one hope,

Shorn bare of all things, beggared utterly
Of every pleasure, and with every ill
Almost beyond endurance overwhelmed,
He seems the noblest soul in all the worlds,—
In grandeur, as in suffering, alone.

“ As for the gift which thou hast promised him,
We do not need to ask thee what it is :
For, of all other gifts, there are but twain
That seem of any worth in Atlas’ eyes,—
The first, deliverance ; the second, death :
And of these twain is one impossible,
Seeing that Atlas will not sue for grace
Or swear allegiance unto Zeus, whom oft
He curses and provokes with bitter words,
Calling him rebel, traitor, liar, slave,
Robber, usurper, and foul parricide.
Wherefore, since neither thou nor any man
Can free him,—no, nor yet the other Gods,—
Whereof some few, ’tis said, as Artemis,
And young Apollo, brave and chivalrous,
And fairest Aphrodité, pity him,
And fain would end his penance if they could,—

The second gift alone is thine to give,
And this, we trow, is that he craves of thee.

“Nor yet, though sorrow clutches at our hearts,
And fain would hold complete dominion there,
Can we be wholly sorry for his death,
Since but by death alone can he be freed
From life-long torture : and we also know
’Twere selfishness to hold him bound to life
Lest we ourselves should suffer losing him.
And therefore will we strive to rest content,
Approving meekly that which he approves.
And yet, oh ! would that it were otherwise,—
That Zeus would even now relent and spare !
’Twere surely easy for Omnipotence
To scorn a bootless vengeance and forgive !
Almighty should be all-magnanimous,
Father of all, not enemy of all,
Save those who for self-interest or base fear
Side with the strongest. Even men themselves
Cry shame on him who strikes a fallen foe :
Shall Gods do less ?—Moreover, men discern
The difference ’twixt revenge and punishment,

Which they ignore. For if the penalty
Avail not for repentance,—nay, inflame
To tenfold rage and fury of revolt,
Why then not pardon? Do the Gods delight
In human agony? Or can it be
That men alone, and Nymphs, and lesser Gods,
Reck anything at all of right or wrong,
Evil or good, while he who reigns supreme,
Being first in power, is also first in ill?"

"I know not," answered Perseus doubtfully;
"For though he be none other than my sire,
Strange things are spoken of him, which, if true,
Nor mere devices of the crafty priests,
Who in their own degraded likeness frame
The Gods they worship, do but ill accord
With justice or with mercy. More than this
Becomes not me, who am his child, to say."

"Thou speakest truth," said Ægle. "Who refrains
His lips from speeches overbold is wise:
For jealous are the Gods, and envious,
And where redress is none, complaint is vain.

Come, let us go together to the crag :
And thou, O Perseus, fetch the skin of wine
Which lieth ready in the Hall of Ge."

Then straightway Perseus rose, and hastily
Caught up the wine-skin and the Gorgon's head :
And through the woods towards the mountain-peak,
With mingled thoughts perplexed, they bent their
way.

Slowly they went, with minds pre-occupied
In various meditations, sweet, or sad,
Or softly melancholy, like fair groves
Just yellowing o'er with Autumn's earliest gold,
On through the woods and up the mountain side,
Till, with late noon, they reached the giant's seat,
Who thus in deep-voiced accents greeted them :

"Thrice welcome art thou, Perseus, not alone
For thine own sake, though that indeed were much,
Seeing that, not bare of honour and renown,
Thou comest, God-like, clothed in mighty deeds,
Whose colours shall not fade nor texture wear

Till earth wax old,—but specially for this,
That as the herald of mine own release,
Bearing great gifts of freedom and relief
To one who long in dire captivity
Hath languished, thou art come, most like a God,
To break my bonds in sunder, rending them
From these cramped limbs, and,—setting wide the
doors

Of this my narrow, stifling prison-house,—
To bid me doff my manacles, and thence
Walk forth once more a freeman with the free,
Who own no lord or king save only one,
Whose yoke is freedom from all mortal chains.”

“O Atlas,” answered Perseus solemnly,
“Freedom indeed I bring, as thou hast said,
For boundless is the freedom of the grave,
And free beyond all thought of mortal man
Are those that enter through its gloomy door
Into the realms of that dark potentate,
Who looseth every bond beneath the sun,
Yet reigneth king himself o’er all things,—Death.
And yet bethink thee, for thy nieces’ sake,

Not for thine own indeed,—for such a plea
With thee were worse than useless,—wilt thou not
Abate some little of that noble pride
Wherewith thou championest a broken cause
Which is not bettered by thy suffering,
And crave, I say not grace, but amity,
With mutual oblivion of the past,
From Zeus?—and we will join our prayers with
thine.

So mayst thou yet find favour with the Gods,
Honour, and fellowship, and high esteem,
As one whose faith, not lightly proven, stands
Unsullied,—stauncest foe and firmest friend.”

And mockingly the giant made reply :
“Thou sayest well ! Come, let us ask of Zeus,—
For he is ever kind and merciful,
Not prone to anger, easily appeased,
Yea, tender-hearted, loving, pitiful,—
And he shall pardon Atlas’ grievous fault :
For grievously indeed hath Atlas sinned,
In that he turned not traitor to his lord !
Aye, aye, great Zeus shall pardon Atlas’ fault,

And then shall Atlas have his own again :
Aye, and perchance his seat among the Gods,
His draught of nectar and his golden cup,
His daily platter of ambrosia,
His rich apparel and his dainty cates,
His appanage, his service, and his state :—
For Zeus is very kind and merciful !
And softly shall he sleep on beds of down,
And see good days and have his ease therein,
Rendering due thanks to Zeus with grateful heart,
As seemeth him who in an honoured foe,
Their conflict ended, finds a generous friend.—
For is he not most kind and merciful ?—
Come, let us chant a pæan in his praise,
Kind master, faithful friend, and equal foe !”

“Thinkst thou he will not hearken?” Perseus cried :
’Tis well-nigh past belief !”—“Nay, nay, good
youth,”

The Titan answered. “Will devouring fire,
Deaf seas, and ravening tempests hear thy voice ?
Or will the hungry earthquake list, and spare
The town its jaws are gaping to engulf ?

If these will hearken to thee, then will Zeus ;
If these forego their prey for tears or prayers,
Why so will he : for he is merciful
As wolves or panthers be to helpless sheep,
Easy to be entreated as the rocks,
And pitiful as that red pestilence
Which finds a realm and leaves a wilderness.

Ask naught for me : 'twere worse than wasted
breath :

And he that pleads for Atlas earns himself
Disfavour : for a tyrant loves not those
Whose intercession in his victims' cause
Implies a covert censure on himself.
Yet even though he were, in very deed,
As swift to hear, to answer, and forgive,
As he is careless and implacable,
Still would I ask for nothing at his hands,
Save only freedom unconditional ;
Which is my barest right : for I have done
No evil, and my cruel punishment
Is foul injustice, which shall yet recoil
In tenfold curses on my torturer's head.

“And though I love my nieces tenderly,
And though it grieves me sore to part from them,
I were no longer worthy of their love
If in this shameful mart I stooped to buy
Life with dishonour, forfeiting my faith
To Cronos, whom alone, as Heaven’s high lord,
I worshipped and will worship to the end.
For traitors still are traitors, howsoe’er
Their treason prosper. I will none of them.—
Give me thy skin of wine, kind youth, I pray,
And take my thanks. I fain would taste of it,
And drink a health to Cronos ere I die.

“Ha ! ’tis a goodly wineskin thou hast brought :
Yea, and without too careful husbandry,
The must therein, when mingled twain for one,
Will yield two brimming cups. This first to thee !

“Aye, ’tis a royal vintage, and a fit
Wherewith to brim a bumper to a king !
And to a mighty King, a King of kings,
Will Atlas quaff his latest draught.—To Thee,
Thou brighter offspring of bright Uranus,

Who wast from the beginning, and shalt be
When heaven and earth, and everything therein
Of human and divine, save Thee alone,
Whom Death can touch not, no, nor Change destroy,
Are whelmed, and lost, and merged again in Thee :—
To Thee, who art the first and last of things,
Lord of all Ages, Prince of all the Hours,
Past, present, or to come :—to Thee, great Power,
Exhaustless wellspring of all secular Force,
All thought, all life, all light, all entity,
Dread Principle whose boundless essence flows
Straight from the soul of Destiny :—to Thee,
Father, and friend, and lover of mankind :—
Cronos ! to Thee do I, thy worshipper,
Thy friend, thy liegeman, faithful to the death,
Drain this last cup in farewell greeting !—So !
'Tis emptied to the dregs.—And now, old friend
Of many years, through good and evil fate,
As faithful to thy lord as he to his,—
My brazen goblet, curiously wrought,
Last remnant of my once enormous wealth,
His gift, when first among the elder Gods
I, then a stripling of some hundred years,

Sat down at Cronos' table,—from which hour
Through fortune and misfortune, thou and I
Have fared together always,—it is meet
We clave together still. Thy master dies
This hour,—wouldst thou survive, old comrade, say?
Nay, nay, I trow thou wouldst not.—Lo then, thus
I dash thee on the rocks, and shatter thee!

“ See, see! what shadowy form stands shrouded
there,

Hard by the broken goblet, beckoning me?
Ah! now it lifts the veil! The face is fair:
Yea, strangely beautiful.—Look, Ægle, look!
It is mine Hour, whereof thou toldest me!

“ Aye, in one hour shall Atlas be no more,
Yet have I much to say.—Come hither, Ægle,
And Arethusa, and Hesperia,
And kiss me: I have loved ye tenderly:—
Had ye indeed been born of mine own loins
I could not love ye more than I have loved.
Nay, weep not: grieve not for old Atlas' sake,
But think of him a little through the years,

When he shall sleep quiet among these crags
That were so long his weary prison-house,
Peaceful at last as they. Nay, nay, sweet girls,
Unman me not with these your piteous tears :
This is mine hour of triumph ! I am free :
Free ever, and free always. What is death,
That ye should weep because old Atlas dies ?
Nay, rather should ye glory at mine end,
And sing aloud for joy that I am free !
For death is freedom, welcome past all words,
From this intolerable servitude ;
And with a joyful heart doth Atlas die.
Die, said I ?—Nay, live rather once again ;
For Atlas hath been dead these thousand years,—
Aye, worse than dead, a miserable slave
To his unjust oppressor. Long ere this
Had I refused dishonourable life,
And whelmed myself and all the Universe
In one fell heap of ruin, casting down
The heavens upon the earth, slaying myself
To slay my persecutors, but for this,
That I have loved the race of men too well
To doom them to destruction ;—all for what ?—

To free myself from galling servitude,
And wreak my spleen on those that hated me.
Therefore have I refrained.—It were not just
To slay the injured with the injurers,
The guiltless with the guilty. Heedfully
This many a year have I sought out some way
Whereby myself alone might cease to be,
And these be safe : and this is such a way.
For now my body, rigid, turned to stone,
Will buttress up this column as of old,
And heaven and earth continue as of old,
Though I be not.—Weep not so bitterly,—
I beg, entreat, command ye, not to weep.—
My little children, whom I loved and nursed
Long since on these my bent and wearied knees,
Dream not that Atlas doth not love ye still,
Even as he hath loved you from the hour
When ye were born into this Universe,
Misgoverned by a tyrant's fell caprice.
Living or dying, Atlas loves ye still,
As he hath ever loved ye, better far
Even than life itself, when life was life,
Not servitude and torture. Infinite

As Space itself, or the disastrous power
Of tyrant Zeus, is this my love for ye :
Nor do I think that it can wholly die,
Though I be nothing. In this supreme hour,
When all things else are ashes in my sight,
I love, adore, and bless ye ! Fare ye well !

“Come hither, Perseus, son of Danae.
Brave art thou, righteous, just and generous,
A good man and a true. I do believe
Thou art the only good thing born of Zeus :
And thee alone of all his thankless brood
I curse not, but do bless and honour thee.
May all thy life be fair and prosperous :
And when thou diest, if so be, indeed,
That thou dost die the death of mortal men,
May death be welcome to thee as to me,
Though for far other cause. Give me thine hand :
Thou hast my thanks and blessing. Fare thee
well !

“Now, thou Usurper of thy father’s throne,
Arch-tyrant of the groaning Universe,—

Thou vile misgovernor of Gods and men,—
Old Atlas, once thy victim and thy slave,
Hath somewhat for thine ear, ere yet thy chains
Fall from his shackled and tormented limbs,
And he be free, as death makes all men free,
Even from thee, thou cruel taskmaster,
Beneath whose yoke the whole world travaileth,
And Man, thine unresisting bondsman, bows
His hopeless head, brought level with the dust,
To do thee homage,—thee, relentless fiend,
Who slayest the soul within the living corse
With torments subtler than a thousand deaths,
Yet callst thyself with hideous irony
Just, kind, and merciful, father of men,
Their stay in trouble, their support in need,
Protector of the poor and the distressed,
Giver of all things good, source of all light,
All-wise, all-loving, all-beneficent !—
Hear me, I say, thou foul usurper, hear !—
Me, whom thy savage unrelenting wrath
Hath robbed and persecuted and enslaved,
And slain a thousand times, each several year
Of these my thousand years of agony,

Exhausting all thine ingenuity
Of devilish vengeance on my hapless head,
Because I would not own thee just and good,
Who art unjust and evil, first of all,
And most of all, in earth or heaven or hell!
Hear me, thou demon throned above the skies,
Thou blight, thou murrain, thou incarnate curse,
Thou soul of all things most detestable,
Hear me and tremble!—Atlas' eyes are clear :
The future lies before him like a scroll
Open, and in it he doth read thy doom!
Lo thou shalt fall, even as Cronos fell!
The sentence hath gone forth, the hour is fixed,
The writing even now is on thy walls,
Graved with the iron pen of Destiny,
In characters as of corroding fire!
Lo, thou shalt fall!—I see another rise,
And from thy brows he tears the golden crown,
And spurns thee howling forth into the dark,
Beaten and bruised and conquered and despised,
Bereft of empire and of majesty,
Dethroned and disanointed! Get thee hence,
To thine appointed place, thou parricide,

Despoiler and supplanter of thy sire,—
Thou shameful offspring of a righteous stock,
Thou incubus, thou blot, thou red disgrace,
Thou monstrous hell-birth, dark and damnable!—

Ho! Zeus, I say!—Thou monarch of the Heavens,
Before whose iron sceptre Gods and men
Grovel in ignominious slavery,—
Atlas the Titan cries aloud to thee,—
To thee, Almighty Ruler of the world,
Almighty Wrong, Almighty Infamy!—
With his last breath old Atlas curses thee,
Robber and tyrant! Can Omnipotence
Dethrone the right or sanctify the wrong,
Make evil good, good evil, truth untrue,
Cruelty merciful, or mercy cruel?—
Aye, spite of all thine arbitrary power,
Thy love of evil, thy despite of good,
Thy mockery of justice and of truth,
And all thy hypocritical pretence
Of love and of benignant fatherhood
Towards the thrice-miserable race of men,
Whom thy malignant soul doth ever hate,
And whom thou torturest to make thee sport :—

Aye, spite of all, Arch-Fiend, Arch-Hypocrite,
I know thee what thou art,—coward and fool,
Liar and slave!—I hate thee and abhor!—
Aye, aye, I hear thy muttering thunder growl,—
Growl as thou wilt, I laugh and mock at thee.
Thou canst not harm me. I am past thy power.
Self-doomed, I perish by myself, not thee.
I am mine own destroyer. I am free :
No more thy slave and bondsman!—Free in death!
Free from thy violence, wrongs, and cruelty!
Free! free, I say! Dost hear me? Do thy worst!
I do defy thee!—With my latest breath
I curse, deride, contemn, and spit at thee!

“Lo I have spoken! Nothing now remains,
Except to make an end. This solid rock
Should yield a firm foundation for those shafts
Whereto mine arms shall turn,—and thus I plant
Each hand immovably. 'Tis passing strange
To think that they shall stir from thence no more
Till heaven's wide roof shall rend, and, crumbling
down,
O'erwhelm the earth. Fair son of Danae,

My Hour is come, and I am well prepared :
I claim the boon thou swarest unto me.
Fulfil thine oath ! Unveil the Gorgon's head !”

Then Perseus held aloft the Gorgon's head :
And for a while was silence, such as falls
On weeping mourners when the shroud is drawn
Back on the still pale features of the dead.

With fast-closed eyelids and averted eyes,
For moments slow as hours did Perseus stand
Dangling the trophy by its horrid hair
Before the Titan's eyes,—then warily
Veiling the ghastly face, he looked, and lo !
Atlas was there no more, but in his stead
What seemed the statue of a giant, hewn
By giant hands out of the living rock.
And close beside the statue stood the Hour,
That straightway, opening wide its shadowy vans,
Dissolved like smoke, yet bore, or seemed to bear,
Close-clasped against its fond maternal breast
The likeness of a little babe that smiled.

Senseless, half-dazed, scarce heeding what they
saw,

The Nymphs, with blank uncomprehending gaze,
Stood dumbly staring on the marble form,—
Then, in a passion of despairing grief,
Flung their warm arms about the senseless stone,
And, blind with weeping, kissed it tenderly,
Wailing, "Farewell, O father, teacher, friend!
Wisest and best! Farewell for evermore!"
When lo! there rose a little wandering wind,
That through the rocks in dreamy undertones
Crooned softly, like a voice that sighed "Farewell!"

Weeping, they turned away disconsolate,
While, whispering words of comfort, Perseus drew
Their faltering footsteps from the fatal crag,
And down the dangerous pathway safely steered
Their slow, reluctant course,—for oftentimes
They turned, and, gazing sadly on the height,
With arms extended, stood and wept anew,
Or, stumbling onwards, heedless of the track,
Looked backwards, moaning passionate farewells
To ears that heard not. Thus, with lingering feet,

About the earliest setting of the sun,
They reached the garden and the sacred tree
That bare the golden apples, at whose foot
They stayed, and Ægle thus to Perseus spake :

“ O Perseus, well-beloved, we needs must sing
Our magic chorus round the sacred tree :
And since thy lips, now touched with fire divine,
Are opened, and thy soul with prophecy,
Not less than ours, enlightened and inspired,
I pray thee join with us in mystic song,
That not without due service, duly paid,
May end this fateful day of smiles and tears.”

Forthwith within the circle of the snake
The sisters stepped, and joining hand in hand,
With Perseus, chanted thus their nightly song :—

PERSEUS.

Or ever the Heavens and Earth began,
Or the word of God on the lips of Man

Gat speech, the swift-winged Spirit of Light,
Afar in the soulless depths of Night,
Through the sluggish veins of the Darkness ran
Like living fire, and stirred the strife
Of Thought and Life.

ÆGLE.

And, rising from the illimitable void,
Pale dreams of Beauty sunk to sleep
Upon the formless bosom of the deep
Took shape and substance, and were born
Out of the darkness, smitten yet undestroyed,
Softly as breaks the flower upon the thorn
In youngest June,
When sun-winds, scattered and astray
Among the balsam-breathing woodlands, play
Their softest tune.

ARETHUSA.

And softly from the breast of Night
The orbéd world arose,
As doth the young Spring's green delight
From Winter's snows,

When from her frozen sleep, in Death's despite,
Bursts forth the rose.

HESPERIA.

Softly as a dream of Love, beholden
Through the voiceless death of Age and Change,
Flooding all the heaven with sunlight golden,
Lo, a revelation rich and strange,—
Starry Hyperion, dawning,
Wakes the music of the morning.

PERSEUS.

Lo! upon the steeps of Night,
Snowy-cold, silvery-white,
Down her pathway star-bestrewn,
Throned and crowned in virgin might,
Dreaming rides the pearly Moon.

ÆGLE.

And strong and swift, fulfilled with colour and light,
The warp of sunbeams through the weft of air
Smote, like awakening consciousness, and soon
A giant, lusty and fair,

Clothed round with golden suns, and silvery star-
beams, bright
In the pale splendour of the wakening moon,
Between Death's night, and the rising stars of morn,
The Heavens were born.

ARETHUSA.

Lo! with convulsed and inarticulate moan,
Transpierced and smitten by the arrowy light,
In clouds and mists muffling her sightless eyes,—
Into the realms of Night,
Into the caverned darkness waste and lone,
Whose dawnless blackness knows no morrow,
Like a grey wraith of banished sorrow,
Shuddering, affrighted Chaos flies
In anguish from the smiling skies.

HESPERIA.

And o'er the bridal bed
Of Heaven and Earth, new-born, new-wed,
The Hours, light-hearted, strew
Garlanded wreaths of amaranthine gold.
And all ablaze with scintillating life,

Throbbing and pulsing on from pole to pole,
The flashing billows of the sunlight roll
Their strenuous tide of secular strife,
And, like a blazoned scroll,
The sapphire skies unfold
Their laughing depths of blue.

PERSEUS.

Thence, on a summer morn,
Beside the waters of that sea
Which mortals call Eternity,
Whose solemn tide with dark resistless flow
Sweeps on unceasingly,—but whence or whither
No soul of Gods or men that wanders hither
Out of the ocean of primeval Night
Through trackless wastes of ante-natal gloom
To this our little isle of light
Hath ever known aforetime, or shall know
Hereafter, till the whole world cease to be,—
With many a groan and many an anguished throe
Of the vast Universal Womb
A splendid spirit was born,
With majesty sublime

Clad round about, and on Olympus' height
Throned loftily in irresistible might,—
Cronos, the Lord of Time.

ÆGLE.

Lo! at thy call,
Great Lord of Time, that once wast Lord of All,
A golden age of golden years
Dawned forth on earth, and men were glad therein,—
Ere labour, sorrow, and tears,
Madness, and wrath, and sin,
Born of the envious Gods, began
To cloud and bind the spirit of Man,
That once was joyous and free
As the winds and the waves and the sea.
Not with the wine of fears,
Not with the gall of hate,
Thou feddest him early and late
O Lord, O Father, O Friend :
Not then was he bondsman and thrall
'Neath the lash of an iron fate :
But the good days come to an end,

And the ill days tarry and wait :—
Thou art fallen, our Lord, thou art fallen, that once
wast so goodly and great !

ARETHUSA.

For on Othrys the trumpet pealed
And the gathering phalanx grew :
From Olympus the thunders rang
And the arrowy death-shaft flew.—
With a crash and a brazen clang
Of shivering spear upon dinted shield
The reeling armies shocked in the field,
And the battle of men with Gods began.
The huge axe clave, and the swift sword
smote ;
With its thin, dry, snaky note
The hungry arrow whistled and sang :
From a thousand gaping wounds the red blood
started and ran,
Crushed down by a thousand rocks whole legions
grovelled like swine,
And still the dauntless giants hewed on through
the ranks divine,

And their huge brands hissed as they fell.
But the lightning thinned their ranks as they drave
the Gods before,
And one by one they staggered and sank to rise no
more.

They perished, each where he stood,
The glorious Titan brood,—
In the foremost ranks of the fight
They perished that would not yield,—
And the doom of the world was sealed.
Sternly they died, with their face to the foe : none
wavered or fled :
Grimly they slew and were slain : full bravely they
fought and well,
Like sons of the Golden Age : but the Golden Age
was dead,
And the battle was lost and won.
And in thunder and dust and blood
The Iron Age began,
And Wrong gat power upon Right,
And Death gat power upon Man :
And the thread of the Fates was spun.

HESPERIA.

Not last nor least among these,
Atlas, thy fame!
From the mountains of Morn to the shoreless sun-
set seas
The wide world rings with thy name!
By the tattered standard, alone,
When the Star of Evening shone
Pale on the death of the dying days,
In the latest rays
Of the fading light,
With the dead behind and the foe before,
Thy streaming falchion bickered and shore,
Mighty to slay and to save:—
While back, like a breaking wave,
From around thee staggered the fight.—
Yet thou couldst not find a grave!

PERSEUS.

And afar from the cloudy height
The Thunderer looked on the fight,
And alone on the stricken field
He saw thee and bade thee yield.

He proffered thee pardon and grace,
Lordship and regal sway :—
With a smile as of scorn on thy face
Back echoed thine answer, “ Nay !
Old Cronos’ liegeman am I :
With thee and thy brood accurst
I know no truce till I die ;
I spit at thee ! Do thy worst ! ”

ÆGLE.

And the dread brand rose once more ;
And smitten through shield and side,
On the red field reeking with gore
A Cyclops grovelled and died.
But the quivering lightning sped
Full at thy dauntless head :
And stricken, but living still,—
Though the sense of being was lost,
And the blood ran cold in thy veins,
Like the song of a frozen rill,—
They bound thy hands with chains,
Bound thee and led thee away,
The last of the Titan host.

And over the wide Thessalian plain
The night and the silence sank again.—
Thus ended that fateful day.

ARETHUSA.

Age-long thy penance and sore,
Crushed down for a thousand years 'neath the
weight of the ponderous skies ;
Doom such as was thine none ever hath known
before,
Nor shall, till the whole world dies.
Through ages of labour and pain
Thou didst call upon Death in vain :
But the grisly phantom passed thee by,
To prey upon such as feared to die.

HESPERIA.

Yet not more mighty to bind
The tameless soul in its prison of flesh and of bone
Is Zeus, than Man to unlock
The gates of his dungeon,—and thou,
In the heart of the rock,
On the breast of the stone,

Sleepest softly,—and now
Free, fetterless, unconfined,
In the happy Isles of The Blest
Findest peace, finest rest.—
Not last nor least of thy peers
The children of unborn years
Shall name thee in deathless song :
Till the life of the world wax old
So long shall thy tale be told :
While the arch of the sky stands sure
So long shall thy deeds endure,
O Titan, gentle and strong !

SEMICHORUS.—PERSEUS, ÆGLE.

How sayest thou, then,
That his fame shall endure ?
To the children of men
What one thing standeth sure ?
As the life of dead seeds,
As the breath of blown flame,
Is the sound of Man's deeds
In the trumpet of Fame.

SEMICHORUS.—ARETHUSA, HESPERIA.

As the germ from dry seeds,
As the flame from the spark,
So the fame of great deeds
Gathers strength in the dark :
Ever green, ever bright,
It shall grow, it shall burn,
Till this earth, sprung from Night,
To the Night shall return.

They ceased : the heavens were holy overhead
With solemn calm, while from the scented copse
The nightingale sang softly, and the moon
Rose, weirdly radiant, from the darkening waves,
Like Life triumphant o'er the grave : the streams
Sang dreamily, and through the whispering leaves
The low night-murmur, wakening, rose and passed
Sighing : and Ægle looked in Perseus' eyes,
That answered hers with silent eloquence,
As through the deepening twilight of the woods
They vanished, passing to another life.



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